

A world of languages — and language houses

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The world needs houses of language for the same reason that it needs expositions of all kinds, from the arts to natural history — to satisfy our insatiable curiosity about who we are, as members of the human race, where we have come from, and where we are going, and to demonstrate that we, as individuals and as communities, can make a difference to life on this planet. We expect, in a major city, that there will be a museum or gallery or other 'house' which will inform us about the main fields of human knowledge and creativity — to show us what others have done before us and to suggest directions where we can stand on shoulders and see new ways forward. Science, textiles, space exploration, and many other domains now have their purpose-built expositions. But language, for some reason, has been seriously neglected, despite the fact that it is only through languages that these other domains can be described and explained.

Houses of language are really needed, because they testify to the centrality of languages in our world and to the defining role of language in human identity — *homo loquens*. There is a grass-roots fascination about language deep within everyone. We are all intrigued by the names of people and places. We think long and hard of what name to give our children. We debate endlessly the changes taking place in the language we hear and see around us. We watch in awe as children learn to speak, often more than one language at a time. We are diverted by the different accents and dialects of a region. We are curious about the history of words. Everyone has these interests because everyone speaks, writes, or (in the case of many deaf people) signs. And people want to share their interests. Not long ago, I received a letter from an old man in the north of England who had been collecting local dialect words for years. He had a collection of several hundred, many of which, he said, were not recorded in the local dialect dictionaries. What could he do with them? Where could he archive them, so that other people could enjoy them too? If there were a house of languages in Britain, I could have told him.



The proposed World Language Centre — Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding, Reykjavik

That is what a house of languages does. It provides a focus, a locus, a means of directing the linguistic energy which lies within all of us. It is a place to which we can turn when we want a question answered or believe we can provide an answer ourselves. And there are so many questions because there are so many languages. It is always difficult to answer the question “how many languages are there in the world?” as the boundary between a language and a dialect is often uncertain. Estimates for languages vary between 6 000 and 7 000. Estimates for major dialects — those which have been given a nationally recognized name, such as the Cockney dialect of London or the Neapolitan dialect of Italian — run as high as 10 000. And of course, there are innumerable minor dialects in every language that have never achieved the status of being given a national name. The situation is made even more complex because living languages are always changing, so that one year a way of speaking might be called a dialect and the next year a language — as happened after the civil war in former Yugoslavia, when the newly independent countries who had previously spoken dialects of Serbo-Croatian proudly presented themselves

as speakers of Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian, now thought of as languages. But what is complex is also intriguing, and demands the best in exposition.

The closing decades of the 20th century proved to be a particularly significant period in the history of language, for it presented us with a new range of intriguing questions. There was a coming together of three major trends, each global in its implications, which fundamentally altered the world's linguistic ecology. There was the arrival of the world's first genuinely global language — English. There was the realization that huge numbers of languages are endangered or dying, which resulted in a sense of crisis and fresh initiatives towards preservation and regeneration. And there was the ground-breaking arrival of Internet technology, which supplemented spoken and written language with a linguistically novel medium of communication, and added a further dimension of variety to our world multilinguistic experience.

A global language

Why do we now have a global language? The chief reason is the growth in the number of countries wanting to talk to each other, for political, commercial, or cultural reasons. The membership of the main political forum, the UN, grew in the second half of the 20th century from some 50 members to its current level of 193, and there has been corresponding growth in many international bodies. Other global trends in the use of English, in such domains as air transportation, advertising, science, technology, and broadcasting, have been repeatedly documented. The result has been a global spread for English which is unprecedented in linguistic history. Current statistical wisdom suggests that around one in three of the world's population use English to some degree — that's at least two thousand million. This remarkable figure is not of course because of its mother-tongue speakers (which account for only some 400 million people), but because of its use by people as a second or foreign language, who today outnumber native-speakers in a ratio of some 5 to 1.

Language death

Although languages have come into existence and died away throughout human history, it was only in the second half of the 20th century that we saw the process of endangerment and death emerge into public view so dramatically. The thrust of the facts is easy to summarize, even though people are understandably tentative over the exact figures involved: of the 6000+ languages in the world, it seems probable that about half of these will disappear in the course of the present century — an average of one language dying out every fortnight or so — and that this rate of loss, caused chiefly by the impact of international languages and cultures, is significantly greater than at any previous time in recorded history. Professional awareness of the crisis developed only in the 1990s, following the publication of a series of world-wide surveys, and popular awareness is still very limited, and certainly nowhere near the corresponding awareness of biological loss that we associate with the environmental movement. Most people have yet to develop a language conscience. That is another of the things that a house of languages can help do.

The growing awareness of the existence of so many endangered languages is one of the reasons that public interest in language diversity has grown dramatically in the last twenty years. The global story is being seen repeatedly in the histories of individual languages at risk, many of which are in Europe. Europe is fortunate in having several decades of experience in the management of minority languages, political and administrative structures to channel the expertise, and a history of decision-making which has resulted in important safeguards and recommendations. The local movements in support of Welsh, Gaelic, Catalan, Romansch, and many other local languages have built up a dynamic which reached unprecedented levels in the 1990s, illustrated by such public statements as the European Minority Languages Charter and the Barcelona Declaration of Linguistic Rights. International and national organizations concerned with language death (such as the UK's Foundation for Endangered Languages, or the UNESCO clearing-house in Tokyo) date from 1995. It is the recency of the movement which explains why it has so far

had relatively little public presence, by comparison with the green movement in general. But there is no doubt about the seriousness of the situation, which is proportionately much greater than in the case of zoological and botanical endangerment. Nobody is suggesting that half the world's species are going to die out in the next century.

The multilingual Internet

Terms such as 'global village', which became widespread during the 1990s, were reinforced in that decade by the third major change, the arrival of the Internet. Although the Internet as a technology has been around for several decades, few people would have had easy access to it until the mid-1990s, when most people started using it for e-mails and chat. The World Wide Web itself only came into existence in 1991, and Google in 1999. What we now have is a new medium — computer-mediated communication — which is undeniably a revolution technologically and socially, and which is just as much a revolution linguistically. This new medium is remarkable, not because it has introduced us all to new jargon, but because it has provided us with new alternatives to the way in which human communication can take place and presents our world of languages in revolutionary ways. It is neither like traditional speech nor like traditional writing. It is unlike speech, most obviously, in lacking the immediate feedback we rely upon when we engage in face-to-face conversation. And it is unlike writing in its impermanence: pages on screen can change as we watch (through animation and text movement), and be refreshed in ways that written language, with its stability, cannot match. Chatroom conversations are unlike speech in that they enable us to participate in many conversations simultaneously. The World Wide Web is unlike writing in the way it allows us to jump at the click of a mouse from one page or site to another. The Internet, in short, has adapted features of speech and of writing to suit an electronic medium, and added other features that neither speech nor writing could ever convey. This if nothing else confers on it revolutionary status in the history of human communication.

But for languages — and especially for minority and endangered languages — its effect is also nothing short of revolutionary. The Internet began as an exclusively English-language medium, for obvious reasons to do with its point of origin in the USA; but by the mid-1990s it had already attracted a significant other-language use. The statistic most often cited at that time was that up to 20% of the Internet — by which people generally meant Web pages — were in languages other than English. By 2000 this figure had risen to 30%, and by 2003 it had passed 50%. Much of this increase was the result of the larger languages coming increasingly online — German and Japanese, for example — but the opportunity the Internet provides for minority and endangered languages had also not gone unnoticed. The number of languages online now must be in the region of 2000. Many of these languages have only a few sites, but the more resourceful (and resources-available) minority languages are represented by thousands of sites.

Moreover, the arrival of chatroom technology and social media has meant the emergence of virtual speech communities, in which people who had previously found it impossible to use a language because separated by distance can now join a forum in that language, and experience the immediate benefits that routine interaction can bring. The convenience, economy, and reach of the medium makes it a godsend to language communities which previously would have found the public expression of their language (through broadcasting or the press) beyond their resources. It is also a medium that intrinsically privileges diversity, because of its lack of centralized ownership. Although standards of expression, presentation, and design are emerging, the overriding impression of the Internet is its variety of language and style. It holds a mirror up to our linguistic natures, and all aspects of our traditional linguistic expression may be found there, as well as several new styles. On the Internet, the world of languages is before our eyes and ears as was never possible before.

Houses of languages can come in many shapes and sizes, from tiny displays in a school classroom or local library to a large purpose-built space in a major public building. Whatever their setting, they provide a public focus on our world of languages in a way that no other organizations can achieve. With science and the arts joining forces to explore all aspects of how language works, and an amazing resource of 6000+ languages to draw upon, a house of languages is the ideal way of showing the world what it means to be *homo loquens*.