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## Speaking to the World About Speaking to the World

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So how *do* we ‘speak to the world’? I don’t mean in the sense of ‘learning and using foreign languages’, which is what earlier chapters in this book have been about. I mean: how do we speak to the world about the importance of languages? We have a critical message to communicate. How do we set about conveying it to the general public?

We can of course lecture to them, and write books like this one—but let us not fool ourselves. Even if one of our academic books sold out, we would be talking only about a few thousand copies and a relatively small number of readers. Academic textbooks have an important role in forming intellectual opinion, but they don’t usually get into a Xmas must-buy bestselling list. We have to find other ways of getting people to pay attention to languages. What initiatives would make a permanent impact on the consciousness of the general public, so that people would never forget the important role languages play in their well-being and begin to be active in their support?

Getting people to pay attention is by no means easy. We are part of an intensely competitive world. Human beings are able to take in only so

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much information, and are willing to devote attention, time and money to only a tiny number of the laudable projects that are placed before them. We need to find ways of making languages stand out, appealing to hearts as well as heads. Every now and then an initiative does reach a wide audience. The UNESCO International Year of Languages in 2008 was a case in point, received with great acclaim around the linguistic world—but the British general public had little awareness of it. There was very limited promotion of it in the media. Apart from anything else, it was in competition with other ‘years’: 2008 was also the International Year of Sanitation, the Reef, Planet Earth and the Potato. Even if the notion had grabbed public attention, it would have been a temporary victory only. Once over, these years are largely forgotten. How many remember the IYL and its achievements now? The same point applies to Language Days. We have two: 26 September is European Languages Day and 21 February is World Mother-Tongue Day. But most people do not know about them, and in any case they are only two days out of 365. What do we do the rest of the year?

People need constant reminders to keep an issue in front of their minds. With a topic as wide-ranging and multifaceted as language learning, the reminders need to be many and various. I am a great believer in copying the successes of others. How have other enterprises behaved when faced with the problem of how to gain and maintain the attention of the public? How do the conservationists do it? The scientists? The artists? What happens to make their enterprises front-page news? Or front-screen news? There are three main ways that others have used to achieve a noticeable public presence.

## Awards

Literature, medicine, economics, cinema ... these domains become front-page news by being associated with awards—most famously, the Nobel prizes and the Oscars. The UK has its Turner Prize for contemporary art. In the USA, there are 21 categories of Pulitzer Prize. In relation to language, there is very little. I know of the annual International Linguapax Award, rewarding work in the field of linguistic diversity and

multilingual education. In Ireland, to celebrate the European Day of Languages, Léargas—the Irish organisation that supports international collaboration and exchange—each year holds a competition to encourage learners and teachers to engage with languages in different ways (in 2016, the competition connected languages with geography to explore climate change). The prize is an environmental field trip in a European country. It generates a remarkable range of innovative projects, with the best initiatives awarded the European Language Label and individuals receiving the Language Learner of the Year award.

In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Linguists in the UK has over a dozen awards, including the Threlford Memorial Cup (named after Sir Lacon Threlford, Founder of the Institute of Linguists), awarded annually to a person or organisation, or for a project that has inspired others with an original language initiative. For many years the awards have been presented at an annual ceremony by Prince Michael of Kent, himself an accomplished linguist—a noteworthy indication of the high social profile that languages can achieve. Another of their trophies was in 2016 given a wider remit, now awarded to an individual who has made ‘an outstanding personal contribution and commitment to promoting the understanding of languages, multilingualism, and the values and benefits of language learning’.

Prestigious within the language professions as they are, these awards do not make the headlines. I wonder if anyone outside of those professions is aware of them. Why aren't there more, and why aren't there any really well-known ones? The value of an award is not its monetary value, which can be quite low, or even non-existent. Rather, it provides professional recognition to an individual or institution, motivation for action to that person's or institution's peers and an opportunity for publicity for the subject that the prizewinner professes. Annual prizes keep a topic in front of the public's attention. And not just once a year, when they are announced, but often when the recipients are mentioned. Write-ups tend not to say ‘director Anthony Minghella’ but ‘Oscar-winning director Anthony Minghella’. The attribution is significant: it transforms a name from someone we might not know about (if one is not a specialist) into someone that we *should* know about. And it identifies subjects—areas of knowledge—that we feel we ought to know about. We need to get languages into that position.



Modern society is obsessed with prizes—Oscars, Grammys, Emmys, Golden Globes, Bookers, Pulitzers, Goncourts—and they gain a level of publicity that far exceeds their monetary (if any) value. Anticipation of Oscar nominations lasts for months. The Turner Prize, in its often controversial decisions, has generated a remarkable amount of discussion about the nature of art. So why could there not be an annual national prize for an incarnation of multilingualism—a school, a course, a publication, an individual, an artistic achievement—to be announced perhaps on European Languages Day? A dimension of this kind would complement our professional linguistic activities, and ultimately aid them, for public awareness and sympathy is prerequisite if we are to alter the intellectual, emotional and financial climate within which linguists have to work.

## Artworks

An artistic achievement ... How do we remember someone or some event? We build a monument or statue: *Nelson, Churchill*. We write a play or make a film: *Henry V, Amadeus*. We compose a piece of music: *1812, War Requiem*. We sing a song: *The Ballade of Casey Jones, Woodstock*. We paint a picture: *Mona Lisa, Guernica*. Commemorative artworks keep a topic in the forefront of our eyes and ears. But where are the artworks devoted to languages or linguists? I have seen major public exhibitions devoted to plant and animal conservation, or the history of books, or motor cars, but never seen one that deals solely with foreign language teaching and learning.

I am not talking about the individual works that have been created to celebrate a particular language. I can think of several poems and folk songs which celebrate Welsh, for example, and there are similar compositions about many other languages. I am talking about artworks specifically created to celebrate languages in general, the benefits of multilingualism and the principles and practices of language teaching and learning. Some organisations do promote artistic competitions, such as the BBC's International Radio Playwriting Competition, the BP Portrait Award or the Sunday Times Watercolour Competition. Somebody

ought to establish an annual commission or competition to provide an artwork on the theme of languages, perhaps with a different art form every year—literature, film, photography, painting, music, dance ... The topic deserves at least a symphony, a fantasia, an opera, a ballet, or—to change the genres—a jazz piece, or a guitar extravaganza. Even the folk singers have failed to lament the dangers caused by the loss of language proficiency.

We might hope the language arts would be in the forefront of such activities, but we would be disappointed. There are still far too few poems, plays, novels and works in other literary genres in which notions of language aesthetics, expressiveness, and identity provide the dominant theme. Yet verbal art is a major way of boosting linguistic self-esteem, through the promotion of storytelling sessions, drama groups, poetry readings, public-speaking competitions, singing galas and cultural gatherings. The Welsh National Eisteddfod is a shining example of what can be done. There needs to be an English equivalent.

Within a country, people do not change their minds, or develop positive attitudes about languages, just by being given information; the arguments need to capture their emotions, and art forms are the main way in which this can happen. I am not talking just about artworks of the most expensive kind, produced by professional artists. Amateur art, of the kind frequently devised by teachers in classrooms, can be extremely effective in raising local public awareness. There have been several such initiatives that have produced ingenious products, such as multilingual calendars, postcards, birthday cards and festival posters. I recall a very successful schools competition in 2009 to make cards to celebrate World Language Day, sponsored by the Association for Language Learning, and each year some schools do similar things. At a professional level, a few artists have specialised in providing multilingual items, such as Canadian artist Ilona Staples, who produced a set of greetings cards in several languages, or American sculptor Tim Brookes, who makes wooden carvings containing messages in endangered alphabets.

However, despite all this effort, relatively few artworks retain a permanent presence in a public space. Most artistic creations, of the kind that are produced in schools, arts centres, studios, community centres and other exhibition or performance spaces, disappear from public awareness

once the presentation moment has passed. They need to be archived in an easily accessible way. The best might gain an afterlife through a publication, an audio or video recording, or via the internet—and it is in relation to the increasingly multilingual internet (and especially through mobile phones) where future ingenuity in our field needs to be primarily focused, for the internet is the ultimate archive. A Google day-animation devoted to languages would have a real impact. But what happens offline, in the physical world? Some arts organisations do archive their creations: Shakespeare's Globe, for example, has an archive of all its productions, but it is not publicly available. Accessibility is a critical factor, so how is that to be achieved?

## Arenas

If you are interested in accessing the world of science, you can visit a science museum. Plants and animals, a natural history museum. Painting, an art gallery. In London there are over 300 major exhibition centres which keep their subject matter in front of the public—textiles, transport, maritime, musical instruments, dolls, lawnmowers ... All the major UK cities have an array of spaces devoted to the accessible presentation of some domain of human knowledge, inventiveness or creativity. But for the 6000 or so languages in the world there is nothing, in country after country, other than the occasional local institute devoted to a single language.

Languages ought to be given the same kind of public presence that other domains of knowledge receive. Every city should have a language museum, or gallery, hall, house ... The terminology is debatable, but the reality is not. There is no arena where people can go to see how languages work, how they are used and how they evolve; no space where they can see presented the world's linguistic variety; no public place where they can meet linguists—private as well as professional—and reflect on ways of promoting multilingualism and language diversity.

It has not been for want of trying. The World of Language was one such concept, promoted during the late 1990s in the UK by the British Council and others. This would have been a multistorey building, the



first of its kind, with floors devoted to the world of speech, the world of writing, the world of meaning, the world of languages and the world of language study. A building had even been identified, in Southwark, opposite the new Shakespeare's Globe. The plans had reached an advanced stage, and all that was required was a small tranche (£25 million) of government funding to get the project off the ground. Things were looking promising, but then the government had a better idea, called the Millennium Dome, and all funding stopped.

The money that was wasted on the Dome project would have supported over 20 'worlds of language'. We still have none in the UK. A second attempt in 2006 to develop such a presence also failed, because all available funding was being directed towards the Olympics. Proposals to capitalise on the Games, through the notion of a 'languages legacy', also came to nothing, despite vigorous efforts by supporters. Perhaps, if there had been more multilingualists in Parliament, things might have turned out differently—but here too there is a conspicuous absence, both in the Commons and in the Lords. Despite the avowedly fundamental role of languages in relation to human society and thought, there is an inexplicable reluctance to give them the public presence they demand.

Other countries have come up with similar ideas, under a variety of names, such as 'the language city' and 'the town as a linguistic landscape', but all projects have suffered from a lack of finance, and every major initiative that was being developed in the early 2000s has foundered, either because of a downturn in the economy (which caused the demise of the Casa de les Llengües, 'House of Languages', in Barcelona in 2012, after eight years of development) or changes in political policy (such as the withdrawal of support for the Welt der Sprachen, 'World of Languages', in the Humboldt-Box, Berlin in 2015). The Casa also had a touring exhibition, which I saw in Lleida some time before the project closed, containing an array of innovative presentations and activities. The privately funded Mundolingua in Paris is a rare success story, a fine example of what can be done by filling a small building with linguistic artefacts and interactive opportunities.

The most promising major development is in Iceland, where the former president of Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, has given her name to the Vigdís International Centre of Multilingualism and Intercultural

Understanding, located on the campus of the University in Reykjavik, and inaugurated in April 2017. Another is in the USA, where a proposed Planet Word is at an early stage of development in Washington DC. On a smaller scale, the USA also has the National Museum of Language in College Park, Maryland, originally established within a building, but now a virtual presence. In the UK, an exemplary initiative is the multilingual lending library set up by the Kittiwake Trust in Newcastle-upon-Tyne—a space that contains artefacts as well as books. Local developments of this kind are hugely important, but we still await the creation of a purpose-built national house of languages in the UK.

The world needs houses of languages for the same reason that it needs expositions of all kinds, from the arts to natural history—to satisfy our 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 centre 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. Most of these fields, indeed, now have their expositions. But languages have been seriously neglected.

Houses of language are so important. There is a fascination about language and languages deep within everyone. We are all intrigued by the names of people and places. We think long and hard of what names to give our children. We worry endlessly about 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, and, as tourists, by the languages of the countries we visit. We are curious about the history of words. Everyone has these interests because everyone speaks, writes or signs. And people want to share their interests.

Not so 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. That is what a house of languages does. It provides a focus, a locus, a means of directing the linguistic energy that 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. It is a place, moreover, where we meet like-minded people, and encounter their enthusiasm. We value the atmosphere that comes from the shared experience of seeing a film in a cinema, rather than on a DVD at home, and the same kind of synergy would come from a visit to a house of languages. In an increasingly multilingual and multicultural UK, the case for such a development is stronger than ever.

Based on the experience of visitor footfall in the few cases where language-related exhibitions have taken place, it is clear that a sound business case could be made to justify the establishment of such spaces. When the British Library launched its *Evolving English* exhibition on 2010, which I helped to curate, there was concern in that institution about the level of public interest. They need not have worried. I was told after it finished that it was the best-attended winter exhibition the Library had ever had. School groups travelled from far afield, just as they still do for Shakespeare's Globe, the Natural History Museum and other such places. One of the most appreciated features was the way visitors could leave their linguistic footprint, in the form of an audio recording of their own accent and dialect. I can easily imagine such a facility forming one of the most appealing elements of a multilingual enterprise.

The three as—awards, artworks, arenas—could provide the basis of a PR policy that would complement the initiatives being taken to rebuild the UK's capacity for languages. The support might come from government, language-related businesses, organisations such as the Arts Council or philanthropic institutions and individuals. Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, the UK has always been a multilingual territory, thanks to the indigenous Celtic languages, and it is now a major multilingual nation, as a result of waves of immigration. There is a much stronger awareness of linguistic diversity today than there was a generation ago, and the revitalising focus on foreign language teaching and learning that

this book represents could lead to any or all of the three As becoming a reality in the lifetime of its contributors. This would be the best way of showing that the UK is serious when we talk about 'speaking to the world'.