

# Towards a philosophy of language diversity

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Coincidences. Mathematicians who deal in probability theory are in no doubt about it. Coincidences happen all the time, and it doesn't take much to encounter one. Take birthdays. We are here to celebrate Vigdis's 75th birthday, April 15th. How many people do we need to gather together before we will find two sharing the same birthday? Popular intuition suggests 367 people (to allow for leap years). But if you want more than a 50/50 chance of this happening, the mathematicians have established that you need only 23. Today, we have 200 people in this room. On that basis we should easily have another claimant to the day. {But, as it transpired, there was no-one: the theory evidently may need more work!}

The significance of events is sometimes reinforced by coincidences. Is it a coincidence that we have here a former president born on 15 April? Not if we examine the records, and find that on that day were also born Suleiman II the Ottoman Emperor, Catherine I Empress of Russia, and Bessie Smith known as 'Empress of the Blues'. You are beginning, I trust, to see a pattern? And then we find the day also shared by Leonardo da Vinci, novelist Henry James, and actress Emma Thompson - obviously a good day for the arts and for anyone who might have ended up, once upon a time, as a theatre director. But, to avoid any sin of pride, we should note that April 15 has had its share of gloom. It was the day on which Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and the day the Titanic sank. It is also the day by which Americans have to have filed their tax returns. And it is the day on which the first Disneyland opened and, some years later, the first Macdonalds restaurant.

Which leads me - in case you were wondering would I ever get there - to our conference, for if Disney and Macdonalds do not have iconic status, in relation to the theme of globalization and language diversity, then nothing does. We are here as part of a dialogue of cultures, and our aim (as stated in the preliminary literature) is 'to discuss cultural and linguistic diversity and its economic, political, social, cultural, and technological ramifications'. Specifically, in a workshop (I quote again from preliminary statements) we will be discussing 'the impact of globalization on minority languages and how modern technology can be a tool in documenting these languages and in spreading awareness about them'.

From these formulations, I deduce that this is to be a conference about means and achievements and tasks still to be done, not about the underlying principles involved. The organizers, quite rightly, have assumed that every participant would take it as axiomatic that cultural and linguistic diversity is a basic human 'good'. Although there are many settings where that principle still requires exposition and defence, this conference is not one of them. Similarly, from the way the word 'globalization' has been singled out, the organizers have taken it for granted - again, quite rightly - that we are ready to assign that phenomenon a special causative role in relation to our problem. But where do we go from here? We are asked to consider the 'economic, political, social, cultural, and technological ramifications'. How exactly do we set about doing this?

To begin with, we need to add an extra word to this list of ramifications: linguistic. There are linguistic ramifications too, and it is surprising, given the subject-matter, how often these are neglected. We are aware of the political and economic arguments in relation to diversity - they have been repeatedly rehearsed. We are aware of the social and cultural values which language diversity represents - books have been written about these. And we are beginning to be aware of the role of technology in fostering these values. But underneath all these concerns is - language. And we need to ask: what are the chief linguistic factors fostering or impeding an outcome of maintained language diversity, and how should these be

evaluated? If a comparison of other subjects, such as science and religion, is anything to go by, a systematic discussion of these factors requires an appropriately developed philosophy - in our case a philosophy of language management.

I use the term 'language management' to include all the principles and procedures we need to have in place in order to look after a language or languages, within and across communities. The data which would inform a theory of language management come from several sources, such as language policy and planning, language teaching and learning, multilingualism, and sociolinguistics. Falling centrally within its remit is language diversity and its various tasks - to document, to vitalize (and, where practicable, revitalize), and to publicize. But so do many other concerns, which at first glance seem to be little connected with what we are here to talk about, such as local interest in a language's accents and dialects, concerns about clarity of expression (as in Plain English campaigns, or debate about the accessibility of the language of science), purist anxieties about language change, public concern over the maintenance of linguistic standards, and questions about the relationship between language and literature. At present, each of these topics is the focus of very different professions, journals, societies, and interests. Language and literature, for example, are usually taught in totally different university departments. In schools, there is usually little connection between what goes on in the Modern Languages department and what goes on in the department which teaches children oracy and literacy in their mother-tongue.

I want to argue that there is an urgent need to integrate these many domains of linguistic concern, and this is what a philosophy of language management will have to do. And this integration is especially important, in my view, in relation to the topic of this conference. For I believe the biggest danger to the long-term maintenance of endangered and minority languages comes not from globalization and the other causative factors which have been recognized in the language diversity literature, such as those (like disease and genocide) which threaten the survival of a community. These are external factors which *initiate* the process of endangerment. Once these factors are underway, we know what we have to do: because we find it impossible to stop them, in the short term, we put initiatives in place to minimise their influence - in a word, we try to *manage* them. Many of you spend a significant part of your lives managing the impact of external factors. But there are internal factors also, and these are the neglected ones - factors arising out of the very nature of the languages we are trying to protect, which also have to be recognized and managed, and which, if we do not, can lead quickly and inevitably to the failure of our earlier initiatives. In a phrase: the dangers facing the language diversity movement not only come from without; they also come from within.

Ironically, this second type of danger only becomes apparent when the first danger has been overcome. Let us take a best-case scenario. We encounter a 'small language' - my shorthand in this talk for a 'minority or endangered' language - where the people are enthusiastic about wanting their language to survive. The local and national government is actively sympathetic about wanting the language to survive. And, as part of this active interest, cash has been made available to do what has to be done. It may take a generation - twenty years or more - to achieve this scenario, but such cases do exist. Catalunya has been one. Wales has been another. I live in Wales and I have visited Catalunya twice in the past couple of years as part of ongoing dialogues about language diversity. Both regions are in this second phase of language maintenance. The arguments about the need to preserve linguistic identity are taken for granted, and the outcome has been institutionalised in various ways - such as in the press, in broadcasting, or in parliament. In such places there is no longer a need to persuade the population of the dangers of globalization or the importance of their local language. Those battles have been won. And, as a result of amazing efforts in the last 15 years, there are many such places, the world over.

Some people think that, at that point in these places - to continue the metaphor - the war is over. But it is not. It is simply about to move into a new phase - a phase which is much more difficult to manage than the first, because it involves battles *within* the community. And in the end, without good management, these battles can be just as destructive as an unchecked globalization. What are these battles? I will illustrate from the situation in Wales, which I

know best, but each of the points I shall make I have seen in at least one other community, so I am claiming that these points are diagnostic. If they are, they will ring bells in each of your minds. So, after my first story, whenever I use the label *Welsh* in this talk, replace it by the name of whatever small language you know best.

I first reported this story in my *Language Death*, but it has had many parallels since. It took place in September 1998 when the pop group, Manic Street Preachers used Welsh on a poster to advertise their new album, *This is My Truth - Tell Me Yours*. In Welsh: *Dyma'n ngwirionedd - Dwêd un ti*. The members of the group do not speak Welsh, but, as their spokesperson put it, 'They wanted to do something special for Wales' because 'They are very proud of their Welsh heritage'. What a marvellous gesture - a gesture that is offered so rarely to a language under threat. Discussing this kind of example in Zimbabwe some time after, Shona speakers could not think of anything that had happened in Harare which would have given their language such an immediate profile. It was the same in Johannesburg. Travel around that city centre today, and you will see little evidence in the posters, on the walls, on the signage, of the 11 official languages of South Africa - there is predominantly English. Speakers of the small languages I spoke to were desperate to see some visual evidence of their languages in public view - but there were no resources being devoted to the task, and apparently no motivation from media figures to stand up and be counted, by using their mother tongues in a public way. The pop group example left people out there stunned - in admiration and envy.

Then I told them what the reaction had been, on the part of some members of the Welsh establishment - the reaction that had ironically attracted all the media attention. My southern African friends couldn't believe it. The headline in the *Independent* (27 Sep 1998) said: 'Manic Street Preachers' bad language upsets the land of their fathers'. The reason was that their language had been condemned by one Welsh academic as 'pidgin Welsh and grammatically incorrect... It should be, 'Dwêd dy un di.' His justification - again I quote - 'It's slang ... the language is being allowed to deteriorate. It's an eyesore. Standards are not being kept up.' (Let me give an equivalent in English. It is like saying the line from the Rolling Stones song, 'I ain't got no satisfaction' should be 'I don't have any satisfaction'.) A spokesman for the Welsh Language Board put up a robust defence: 'We welcome the fact that the Manic Street Preachers have produced such a massive banner in the medium of Welsh which reflects popular youth culture.... A lot of teenagers are learning Welsh now, and gestures like these make them proud to be Welsh and to be able to speak the language.' As a journalist put it, in the rather more vivid language of the tabloid *Daily Post*: 'Professor Busybody is defending 'correct' Welsh, keeping it safe in the cosy confines of the Cardiff middle class. The rest of us are left to rue over a lost opportunity to change the perception of the language among young English-speakers of South Wales. The banner stunt was publicity that money can't buy, but the pedantic prof got in the way.' And he concludes, along with the Welsh Language Board, 'The Manic Street Preachers got it right!'

A controversy of this kind raises fundamental questions for diversity managers. They cannot ignore it, because the scenario can be encountered a thousand times a day in Welsh schools and homes. And I have encountered parallel situations, with a confrontation between the elders and the young, in Ireland, Scotland, Slovenia, India, South Africa, the Netherlands, and I confidently expect to encounter it again in Iceland. Certainly this kind of confrontation does a language, struggling to raise its profile, and especially among young people, no good at all. Small languages need every ounce of linguistic energy they can get. If significant amounts of that energy are devoted to quarrelling over which dialect of the small language is best, or condemning those who dare to experiment with the language, valuable opportunities are being wasted. Small languages need good publicity: they need to maintain a positive public presence; they need prestige, and prestige is closely bound up with media support. But unfortunately, so often in recent years one sees such languages repeatedly shooting themselves in the foot, as media opportunities are wasted, and what could be a positive opportunity to take the language forward turns into a piece of negative wrangling, and the experience a source of national and even international ridicule. And the effect reverberates. In the light of this experience, will another pop group repeat the experiment in Wales? I doubt it.

This is what I meant by saying 'the main danger comes from within'. To adapt an old biblical maxim: a kingdom divided against itself shall not stand. For the issue is much more serious than just a matter of publicity. The kingdom especially will not stand when the focus of the divisiveness is age-related. Repeatedly, those involved in the maintenance of small languages refer to young people, as I have just done. The reason is obvious. The teenage generation - which was of course the focus of the Manic Street Preachers initiative - is of critical importance, for teenagers will be the parents of the next generation of children. (In fact, looking at the birth statistics in Wales, many of them already *are* the parents of the next generation of children!.) But my point is that, whenever they have their children, if they are not interested in using their ethnic language to their children, the cause is lost. We have big words for this sort of thing: we call it 'inter-generational transmission', and we accept that a *sine qua non* of language maintenance is that inter-generational transmission must not be lost. The big words suggest a big time-scale, of 25 years or more. But the loss, at the level of the individual, can happen within a day - the day after the new baby is born.

In fact, psychologically, it has happened long before the baby is born, for the confrontational atmosphere is rife in a society where a small language is in the forefront of public attention, and it will have already permeated the consciousness of the new parent. So our focus, in fact, has to move away from the parents to the society of which they are a part. Where does this confrontational attitude come from? Studies of language attitudes - a well-established research domain in sociolinguistics - can provide some answers.

It is important, firstly, to appreciate that the attitudes involved are found in all languages - big as well as small. In any speech community, a few people want to protect their language against what is perceived to be unwelcome change (what is usually called 'purism'), whereas others welcome change, diversity and innovation. English has its purists too, as does French, and Spanish, and Shona, and Zulu. There may even be societies and institutions set up to protect the language - organizations such as The Queen's English Society in London, or the French Academy. The fact that no such organization has ever succeeded in protecting a language from change - French now is hugely different from the language as it was spoken when the Academy was established in 1635 - does nothing to diminish the vigour with which purists advocate their case of 'eternal vigilance'. In the case of English, each generation has repeated the same arguments - and in the meantime the language lives on, growing from strength to strength. If English really were deteriorating, as the purists maintained in the 1700s, the 1800s, and the 1900s, then it would hardly have come to be the world language it is today.

English, of course, has learned to live with the attacks of purists, over the past three centuries. A big language, like English, can cope with all of this. But for a small language like Welsh it is a very different matter. Purists are always a tiny minority, within a community, but they are usually some of its most influential members, and in a small community they wield disproportionate influence, as elders, orators, story-tellers, academics, and suchlike. One purist in a thousand is inevitably more prominent than one in a million. As long as the community remains traditional in behaviour and belief, there is no problem, of course. Conflict only arises when the community begins to change, and becomes susceptible to global influences. Then we encounter the situation illustrated by my Welsh example. A purist minority inculcates feelings of inferiority in the majority, who are made to feel that they do not speak the language correctly - which means, not according to the rules of the grammar books originally written by other purists. The paradox is well illustrated by the remark, often made by English speakers, that 'foreigners speak English much better than I do' - a patent absurdity, yet demonstrating the way in which people have allowed themselves to be brainwashed by the purist image of the language. And the same point is often made in relation to Welsh. 'I don't speak proper Welsh' say - most Welsh-speaking people.

Small languages inevitably have an inferiority complex, and if there were a language psychiatrist the first thing he or she would say is to get over it, move on. But this is very difficult to do. Take one of the symptoms of language neurosis: the fear of loanwords. This is something which affects big languages as well as small ones. Several countries have expressed concern over the way words from English are entering their language, and have

taken steps to try to stem the flow, even sometimes by instituting laws which attempt to ban them. Here too, let us learn from English. What would have happened to the English language if it had forbidden the arrival of loanwords? It would be a language a tenth of the size that it is today, and it would never have become the language of science. English has, like a vacuum-cleaner, sucked in words from over 350 other languages during the past 1000 years - over 10,000 words from French in the early Middle Ages, for example, and all the words from Old Norse at that time. Of the million or so words in English today, 80 percent are not Anglo-Saxon in origin. From a grammatical point of view, English is a Germanic language, but from a lexical point of view it is Classical/Romance. (And thus there is a source of irony when we encounter French objections to the supposed Anglo-Saxon mentality expressed by such loans as *le computer*, forgetting that *computer* was originally a loan into English from the parent language of French.) Loanwords, even on this massive scale, have not harmed English. They have changed its character, certainly. English today is not the same as it was in the year 1000. But is this a bad thing? Much of the delight we have in reading or watching Shakespeare stems from his ability to manipulate stylistic contrasts originating in loanwords from French and Latin. And today, the fact that I have the choice between *kingly*, *royal*, and *regal*, for example, gives me a range of stylistic nuances which would not be available to me if I had only *one* of these words at my disposal. In short, loanwords increase the expressive richness of a language. That is one of the ways, probably the chief way, in which a language grows.

But many speech communities, nonetheless, react against loanwords, and insist on translating the loanwords into something they feel to be 'native'. Even in English, there have been people who have tried to translate French, Latin, and other loanwords into Anglo-Saxon equivalents - notably William Barnes in the 19th century, who proposed such coinages as *birdlore* for *ornithology*. And there are those in France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Wales, and many other countries who systematically translate English words into traditional language forms. One talks of Academy French or Committee Welsh. There is nothing wrong with these activities, as they add to the diversity of a language. What *is* wrong is when people try to legislate, to insist that one version is 'right' and the other 'wrong', and try to make others feel inferior for using the 'wrong' version, sneering at the loanwords by calling them 'Spanglish' or 'Franglais', and so on.

The issues involved need to be thoroughly debated, and so far, in the context of language diversity, they haven't been. Some might even see a contradiction here. On the one hand, to assert that the world is a mosaic of linguistic visions, and that each language is unique in its cultural linguistic identity. On the other hand, to assert that mutual linguistic influence is natural and inevitable and that no language is unique in its cultural linguistic identity. I see no contradiction, because the two principles refer to different linguistic domains. Anthropological linguists do not usually dare to put a figure on it, but if one were to ask 'just how much of a language expresses the unique mindset and behaviour of a community?' what statistic would you come up with? The fact that balanced bilinguals can provide efficient translations most of the time suggests that this figure is relatively low. And when I ask people, few go beyond 25 percent. In other words, when translating between English and Icelandic (or any other language pair) the assertion is that, at least 75 percent of the time, the linguistic units equate. But in that remaining 25 percent there is a great deal that is untranslatable - words which express the culturally unique features of the two languages. So whether a loanword is a risk to cultural identity depends on what sort of loanword it is. And what happens is that most loanwords (all the ones to do with technology, for instance) add to the 75 percent domain - continually extending linguistic horizons as a reflex of cultural trends.

It is naive to look for a simple relationship between language and culture. The relationship is complex and varied. Some words do seem to capture a strong cultural nuance - a French word such as *chic*, for example, or an American English word such as *Thanksgiving*. But most words are not like this: they do not carry such a nuance. When the French began to object to *le weekend* and other such words, it was the word they were objecting to, not the culture. They already had weekends. And it remains to be demonstrated that there is something specifically British or American about *the weekend* which was not already present

in *la fin de la semaine*. Most loanwords are like this. The fact that I fluently order *pizza* from my local takeaway does not turn me into an Italian - but it has made me appreciate more than before the value to the world (in this one tiny respect) of what it means to be Italian.

We must never underestimate the ability of language users to cope with more than one kind of cultural awareness, and this is what our conference should be affirming. Every language-learning experience can teach me something about the culture it expresses. That is the value of diversity. Whatever culturally specific items of language I encounter point me in the direction of these cultural identities. They confront me with them, and if I wish I can allow myself to be assimilated by them. But it does not have to be that way. People who are genuinely bilingual do not find that their cultural identity in either language is threatened by the presence of the other. The learning of other languages will always make your humanity grow, but it does not have to be at the expense of losing what you already have.

I have talked a lot about English. Why do I do so, in a conference on language diversity? The answer should be obvious. If we are concerned about the safety of a small language, it is simply common sense to look carefully at how big languages, which are self-evidently safe, have achieved that position. 'Didn't it do well!' one might say about English - bearing in mind that what we are talking about is a language which originated in a tiny cluster of Germanic dialects, and which only 400 years ago had a total of less than 4 million speakers, and was being viewed as a useless language abroad. So how has it done so well? We know the answer to that question: it is all to do with power - political, military, technological, economic, cultural. But is there anything in the linguistic history of English that has helped its growth? Or, putting that another way, is there anything in this linguistic experience that small languages can learn from English?

Let me adapt this point to the pop group example. When Disney introduced us to the 'Supercallifragillisticexpiallidocious' song, were there headlines in the English press saying, 'Tut tut, there's no such word'? There were not. And when the Spice Girls had their number 1 hit, 'Wannabe', in 1996, I don't recollect seeing headlines saying 'No, it should be *want to be*, and by the way there is a missing complement, as it should be "want to be something"'? The fact that a tiny minority of people might not like any of these song titles is beside the point. In a democracy, everyone has the right to dislike anything. The point is that English has the strength to assimilate such stylistic variation, such playfulness, such breaking of the rules, without fear. English needs to apologise to no-one - by which I mean that English speakers do not need to worry about the future of their language, because it is alive and well and living in the mouths and eyes and brains of 1.5 billion people all over the world. And that strength is precisely because most of these speakers have adopted a 'live and let live' attitude. There is no Academy in English. I may not like American English, or Australian English, or Scots English, but I know very well that there is not the slightest thing I can do about it, because there are always millions more people speaking other varieties of English than the one I speak myself. I might not like their accent, but they probably don't like mine. Fine, let's carry on living - but in the process perhaps also make some effort to begin to take pride and pleasure in the diversity of the language, in exactly the same way that we enjoy our encounter with a garden full of different species of flower. Any proponent of language diversity has to be committed to dialect diversity too.

Purist attitudes do not help the survival of small languages. In fact they make more likely their dissolution. Why? Because they alienate people, and children in particular - because (in the case of loan words, for example) they are the ones who find them most attractive (or 'cool'). In Wales, people complain about the 'committee Welsh' which few understand or use. And when a community comes to believe that the correct form of its language is a language no-one actually uses, the death-knell of that language is beginning to sound. The worst thing you can do to a language is to alienate people from it, by making them feel they do not speak it correctly, by giving them inferiority feelings about it. We have to eliminate the inferiority complex. An unthinking, blinkered purism is the worst enemy a language can have.

What, then, replaces purism? A view of language which recognizes its multifunctionality. The example of world English shows that linguistic diversity is a matter of

mediating between pressures that pull a language in two opposed directions. But these two directions relate to different functions. One function is the maintenance of intelligibility, at a national (or, in the case of English, international) level, and this fosters the development of a standard language and associated attitudes of correctness and propriety. The other function is the expression of identity - who we are (as an individual or a group), where we are from (regionally, socially, occupationally). This function manifests itself both interlinguistically, in the form of the individual languages which identify nation states or ethnic groups, and intralinguistically, in the form of the local accents and dialects which reflect where we were brought up.

The two functions - language as intelligibility and as identity - have often been seen as being in conflict with each other, as presenting a matter of choice. In a bilingual or multilingual community, such as Wales, English (which guarantees intelligible communication with the outside world) is often seen as a threat to Welsh (which guarantees identity with the ethnicity of the population). A similar situation applies in all countries where there are minority groups (which probably means all countries, these days), and can be a ready source of emotional confrontation. It can apply within languages too, as seen in the uneasy relationship between Standard English and Singlish (Singaporean English) in Singapore. But there is no necessary conflict.

If both intelligibility and identity are critical aspects of what it means to be human, then it is plain that a sensible philosophy of language management needs to allow for both. For both criteria link up with the concept of power, but in different ways. Intelligibility is an outward-looking criterion: it fosters the use of common languages, standard varieties, lingua francas. It enables us to be in intelligible contact with the largest number of people, and thus increases access to sources of power. Identity is an inward-looking criterion: it fosters the use of local dialects and accents, non-standard varieties, minority languages. It enables us to identify with a particular group of people within a community (with more than one, if we are bilingual), and although that group is much smaller, the nature of the contact between its members is more intense, more intimate, and may be more useful. Everyone has experienced the rapport which can come from a shared accent, dialect, or language. And everyone knows that benefits - cultural, economic, political - can follow from that rapport. Jobs for the boys, or girls, is as old as humanity. And the main way you show you are one of the boys, or girls, is to talk like them.

So, if I am monolingual in English, it will pay me - literally and metaphorically - to be bidialectal, or multialectal. The new school curriculum for English in England and Wales emphasises this point, drawing attention to the need for all students to become confident users of standard English, but not at the expense of demeaning any regional dialect or other language they may have. This, of course, is the main change in attitude which distinguishes the kind of mother-tongue language-teaching we used to have in schools from that which is present now. And, if I have the opportunity, it will pay me to be bilingual, or multilingual - and even more to be multialectal in my multilingualism. To have a command of a small language along with a command of a big language is one step forward. But it should not stop there. To have command of a standard, educated variety of a small language along with command of a local, regional variety of a small language is another, perhaps even more important step.

This last point is critical, as it raises the question, crucial to the language diversity movement: what does it mean to be bilingual? Everyone these days stresses the point about language use. It is important to *use* a language, if it is to survive. But it is unusual to find people reflecting on just what this means. In fact, 'use' is a complicated matter which has several dimensions. We must take into account, firstly, the four channels of language use: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. (Five if we include signing, in the context of deaf education.) The notion of bilingualism has to allow for differential use between these four. The theoretical maximum is to be able to handle all four well, of course. In reality, bilingualism all over the world shows very different levels of competence between the four, in an ascending order: people who can listen and not speak, speak but not read, and read but not write.

We also have to allow for differential competences within each of these channels. Take listening: at one extreme, there is someone who has 100% listening comprehension ability - understands everything he or she hears in a language in any style of a particular dialect. (No-one, of course, can understand all styles of all dialects, in any language.) At the other extreme, there is someone who has less than 1% listening comprehension ability - recognizing just the occasional word or phrase (eg I have a fluent command of Icelandic, but so far only in relation to the word *Skaul!*). A continuum of ability links these two extremes. And exactly the same continua link extremes within each of the other three channels. To adapt a notion from the European Year of Languages, Person A's portfolio for a particular language might be: 80% ability in listening, 50% in speaking, 90% in reading, and 10% in writing. And cutting across all this is the question of context (also called register, or variety). Person A might understand 80% of what she hears on the television, but only 40% of what she hears in the pub - or the other way round, of course. Or be able to cope with 80% of the language needed to speak successfully in informal contexts, and be able to cope with only 20% of the language needed in formal contexts. Or again, vice versa.

The fallacy is to assume that intermediate steps along the various fluency continua are in some sense a failure. 'Person A has only got 50% reading ability, so she should work hard and get the other 50%.' In actual fact, all over the world, there are people who (for all kinds of reasons) have stopped midway along these continua, and are living perfectly happy lives - except, of course, when someone who is at a higher point along these continua criticizes them for 'not speaking properly', or whatever. The term 'semilingual' is available for us to describe people who are at mid-points along these continua. When I did a BBC World Service programme on this theme a few years ago, I asked people to write in if they thought they were semilingual, in this sense. I expected only a handful of letters, but we got over a thousand. A common theme was that these people had a very mobile upbringing, socially (being guest-workers, refugees, immigrants, etc), who never had the chance to learn a language fully. Many had several languages at their disposal, and were semilingual in all of them. Several actually claimed that they had no mother-tongue. A few were upset about it, but most were simply getting on with their lives. All were relieved to find that they were not abnormal.

You will immediately see the applicability of this point to any country where there is a strong purist tradition, and where semilingualism is widespread - a typical scenario for small languages. There are people who are losing their command of the small language (slipping down the continua), for whatever reason. And there are those who have never got to the top of the continua, for whatever reason. Both tend to be condemned by purists, who thereby generate in the less strong-minded of these people that inferiority complex, which further harms their motivation to continue with the language. Purists, accordingly - and I don't care how often I repeat it - are a small language's worst enemy. It is sad to have to say it, because such people do believe they have their language's best interests at heart; but they are nonetheless wrong. By contrast, as I have said, I take the view that a small language needs every friend it can get, and that someone who shows even the slightest interest in encountering a small language is a friend, and should be welcomed and included within the community, even if their levels are 1% all over, as it were. All the population need to be involved.

In actual fact, most people living in a community where there is a small language are already, to a degree, on the continua. Very few people in Wales know no Welsh at all, or in New Zealand know no Maori at all. My Icelandic has actually grown by 300 percent since Wednesday - I now know three words. It is inevitable that, as soon as you come to visit a community or come to live in it, you start moving on the various continua: you will start hearing the language regularly, you will see it around you routinely. Intuitions begin to be shaped. And people need to have this foetal sense of the small language reinforced. If I were in charge of a marketing drive for Welsh, for example, I wouldn't draw a contrast between Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh-speaking. That is divisive. I would say: everyone in Wales uses Welsh. You can't avoid it. Just by crossing the border, your reading comprehension starts to climb. You are already on the continuum. So, you know one Welsh word? Double your competence, learn another ...! Minority language planners need to think positive, not negative:

not, how much Welsh *don't* you know; but: how much Welsh *do* you know? And if you need to mix two languages together to make communication work (the phenomenon of code-switching), then mix them!

Diversity looks inwards, within languages, as well as outwards, across languages. Valuing a language means valuing the diversity it contains - valuing its varieties, its potential for individualism, its ability to express identity. We need to say, firmly yet sympathetically, to the purist temperament: your views must be respected, but they are only a small part of the story of a living language. The classical varieties of the language are a marvellous heritage, and we must expose our youth to them, but they are not the whole story. The emergence of standard forms in the media is a crucial dynamic strand in the history of the language, but they are not the whole story. But the rebuttal is not unidirectional. We must also say to local people: The maintenance of traditional regional dialects is an essential part of the character of the language, but they are not the whole story. And we must also say to young people: the growth of new vernacular varieties among the young is a valuable sign of life in the language, but they too are not the whole story. You see the point. There is no 'one story' of a language. All languages have many stories, and all play their part in characterising the language today.

All varieties of the language are equally valuable, then, as markers of identity, and none should be condemned. To go back to my pop group example: it should never be a question of condemnation. The academic critic was right to point out that there is a more standard form of Welsh available to express the thought 'Tell me Yours'. He was wrong, so wrong, to suggest that this was the only form of Welsh that deserves a public presence. Welsh is now able to cope with variety, and should begin to be proud of it, to value it. There is every sign that this is happening on Welsh radio and television, as one listens to the splendid range of the language in the voices of newsreaders and disc-jockeys, in arts competitions and television soap operas. This is what I would expect to see in a living language - growth, variation, change, experiment, diversification. And it should be the goal towards which any philosophy of language management should strive.

In the end it comes down to one thing: the need to develop positive attitudes. I'm talking here chiefly about the attitudes of parents and schools. Parental attitudes are crucial, in fostering the language in their children, and thereby guaranteeing intergenerational transmission - but they must be positive, when children bring home a peer-group version of a language which does not coincide with theirs. Telling the children off for 'bad Welsh' does more harm than good. When parents take on the peer group, parents always lose. Schools, likewise, must adopt a more realistic frame of reference for their language teaching. A single bad experience can put a child off for life. I have seen it happen within my own family. When we moved back to Wales, in 1984, my youngest daughter was enthusiastic about the prospect of learning Welsh at her secondary school. At her very first lesson, she was given homework: it was to learn the Lord's Prayer off by heart. I was horrified. It took her ages, and she hated what she saw as a pointless exercise. She produced a passable version without understanding a word of it. But before my eyes I saw another tiny nail being banged into the Welsh coffin. Now I know that there are other examples of Welsh teaching practice which are as far removed from this as chalk from cheese. But we have to move towards a world where such things never happen - where it is all cheese, no chalk.

When parents take on the peer group, parents always lose. The peer group is critical. This is the bridge between home and school, and at secondary level it outranks both home and school, for the obvious reason that kids of that age are not usually overkeen on school and certainly not keen to identify with their parents, as everyone who has had teenage children knows. The only factor that counts is: other teenagers. The watchwords are fashion and style. The greatest accolade (currently) is the word 'cool' (or 'wicked'). For anything to succeed, it has to be 'cool'. So the obvious question is, how does one make a language 'cool'? Plainly it relates to such things as having pop groups using the language in a way that youngsters can identify with; having their stories told and listened to, using digital techniques; building a network of chat rooms on the Internet, and getting the language onto that medium as much as possible; and much more.

Harnessing the Internet to the service of language diversity is the main means we have to counter the forces of purism, and this must surely be one of the themes of this conference. The Internet is the best present the language diversity movement could have had. And it came at just the right time. Let us go back to coincidences. Is it any coincidence that the first truly public statement of the world language crisis, at the Quebec Congress in 1992, coincided with the first year of operation of the World Wide Web? The Internet can do more to foster language diversity among young people than any other means. So we need to find ways of getting language-endangered communities wired - which often means, ensuring a reliable electricity supply. Here, as always, linguistic progress depends on economics.

Talking of presents, it is usual to give somebody a present for their birthday, and my present to Vigdis is this paper. She in her turn has given us all a present, in the form of this conference. If there were a Nobel prize for Language, I think she would win it. But of course there is no such prize. Indeed, everything has its prizes these days - except language. There are the Nobel Prizes for literature, peace, physiology or medicine, physics, chemistry, and economics. There are the Pulitzer Prizes for journalism, music, fiction, and so on. There is the Booker Prize, the Turner Prize, the Prix Goncourt. There is the world's largest financial prize, the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. Every subject seems to have its prize - but not language and languages. A prize is much more than its financial value. It is worth far more in publicity for the subject. Many subjects do not need the publicity. But languages do.

We need a prize, and possibly we will find an Alfred Nobel or a John Marks Templeton among the companies which have been at the forefront of globalization and who are perhaps now feeling a little uncomfortable about it. But if we ever did get such a prize, what would we call it? If you win an Academy Award you are given an Oscar. If you win a television award you are given an Emmy. If you are given a music award in Canada you are given a Juno. If we do ever get a language prize, I think it should be called a Vigdis.