

The future starts here

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This is the perfect moment for the establishment of a house of languages. A decade ago would have been too soon, because the 1990s was a period of linguistic turmoil, when it was difficult to see what was happening both to language in general and to individual languages in particular. Today, things have settled down a bit, trends are more clearly in evidence, agendas have been formulated, and we can begin to plan more sensibly for the future. What is plain is that we are in a transitional period between two linguistic ages. In the new age, language is moving in totally fresh directions, and all of us are having to come to terms with what is happening. We need access to factual information; we need opportunities for discussion; we need a sense of focus. All of this, houses of language can provide.

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 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 language, for some reason, has been seriously neglected - until now. My hope is that what Barcelona does today, the other cities of the world will do tomorrow. And I believe there are some positive signs that this is happening.

Houses of language are so important. There is a grass-roots interest - no, that is too weak a word - there is a 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 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. 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. The other day, 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 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 these days, because of what happened during the 1990s, we are surrounded by new and intriguing linguistic questions.

I said that the 1990s was a period of linguistic turmoil. More accurately, I would say it was a period of linguistic revolution. I do not believe that this is too strong a word. A 'revolution' is any combination of events which produces a radical shift in consciousness or behaviour over a relatively short period of time, and this is what took place in the 1990s. Revolutions, by their nature, do not take place very often, and this is as true about language as about anything else. It is unusual to find changes which are so broad in their implications that they affect groups of languages, and extremely rare to find changes which are so global that they affect all languages.

What makes the second half of the 20th century - and the 1990s in particular - a highly significant period in the history of language is that we can find there a coming together of three major trends, each global in its implications, which cumulatively have fundamentally altered the world's linguistic ecology. First, there was the arrival of the world's first genuinely global language - English. Second, 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 third, 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 linguistic experience. Let me briefly look at each of these trends.



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 191, 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. It is possible to assert with confidence that every major 20th-century cultural trend was either initiated in an English-speaking country or (as in the case of cinema) quickly facilitated by one. The result has been a global spread for English which, although sometimes exaggerated, is unprecedented. Current statistical wisdom suggests that about one in three of the world's population (c.2 billion) use English to some degree. This remarkable figure is not of course on account 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 outnumber native-speakers in a ratio of some 4 to 1.

Because no language has ever been spoken by so many people in so many places before, it is difficult to predict the consequences of having a global language. There will be both internal and external effects. Internally, we have already begun to see new varieties of the language emerging all over the world, as communities adopt English as their *lingua franca* and immediately adapt it to meet their communicative needs. Commonly mentioned are the many *-lishes* which have emerged into public view in recent decades, going by such names as Singlish (in Singapore), Japlish, Chinglish, and Spanglish, which in terms of their structure are now very different from standard English and in some cases are already so distinctive (and, from a standard English point of view, so unintelligible) that we would have to recognize them as different languages. Distinctive international regional dialects of English have always developed, of course, as English spread to the Americas, Australasia, and Africa, and distinctive regional pronunciations and vocabularies have been the consequence. But the changes introduced into these Englishes have been minor, compared with the kinds of change currently taking place - changes which (some have argued) are making English develop at a popular level in ways comparable to the emergence of the Romance languages out of Vulgar Latin a millennium ago. And with the centre of gravity now firmly located under the feet of the non-native speakers of English, the future character of the language becomes more unpredictable now than at any time since the Renaissance.



English is the world's first truly global language. It may not, of course be the last. A language becomes an international or global language because of the power of the people who speak it. It is perfectly possible, therefore - and some futurologists have argued that it is likely - that one day the balance of power will shift from the English-speaking nations to some other bloc and with this change could come language shift. Whether a future world language would be Spanish or Chinese or Arabic - to take just three possibilities - involves considerations which go well beyond the linguistic. But whatever the world language of the future will be, it will have the same consequences and be subject to the same pressures as are currently affecting English. That is why we need to monitor what is happening to English very carefully. A house of languages can help to do that.

The chief external consequences of any language acquiring global status are bound up with the second component of the 1990s revolution, summarised by the phrase '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 and in the 1990s in particular, that we saw the process of endangerment and death emerge into public view so dramatically. Again, the thrust of the facts is easy to summarize, even though people are understandably tentative over the exact figures involved: of the 6000 or so 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 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. But the extent of the ongoing loss in the world's linguistic diversity is so cataclysmic that it makes the word 'revolution' look like an understatement, when we consider it in this context.

This is not the place to go into the reasons for this state of affairs, or what can be done to reduce the impact of the problem. I talked about that at the Linguapax conference in Barcelona in 2004. But it does, I think, help to explain why public interest in language diversity has grown dramatically in



the last decade. 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 at 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 connection between these first two revolutionary trends needs to be recognized, but not oversimplified. The impact of dominant languages on minority languages is a matter of universal concern, and the role of English is especially implicated. But it is important to stress that all majority languages are involved: the growth of English as a global language is not the sole factor in explaining language endangerment. Although it is English that has been the critical factor in the disappearance of languages in such parts of the world as Australia and North America, this language is of little relevance when we consider the corresponding losses that have taken place in South America or in many parts of Asia, where such languages as Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese have replaced local languages. Nor, for that matter, is it always the chief factor in colonial Africa, where inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalries at a local level are often the reason for the endangerment of a particular language. The thrust of the point is a general one: we are having to deal with the consequences of a globalization trend in which unprecedented market and cultural forces have been unleashed, steadily eroding the balance of linguistic power and involving all major languages.

Terms such as 'global village', which became widespread during the 1990s, were reinforced in that decade by the third component of my revolution, the arrival of the Internet. Although the Internet



as a technology has been around for several decades, few of you here today would have had easy access to it ten years ago. Most people came on-line for e-mails and chat during the 1990s, and mostly since the mid-90s. The World Wide Web itself only came into existence in 1991. And 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. 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, is neither spoken language nor written language: it 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 on-line - German and Japanese, for example - but the opportunity the Net provides for minority and endangered languages had also not gone unnoticed. The number of languages present on the Internet now must be in the region of 1500. 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 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 chat-group 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. And it is the sudden availability of this language-reinforcing technology which yields the third element in my revolutionary decade. It should perhaps be added that the medium is one which intrinsically privileges diversity, because of its lack of centralized ownership. Although standards of expression, presentation, and design are emerging, the overriding impression of the Net is its variety of language and style. The Net 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.

It is notable how each of these three trends - the emergence of a global language, the phenomenon of language endangerment, and the arrival of the Internet - have had consequences for our developing notions of linguistic diversity. Global English has given extra purpose to a variety of standard English, in the way it guarantees a medium of international intelligibility; but it has also fostered the growth of local varieties as a means of expressing regional identity, and some of these new varieties will, in due course, evolve into new languages. The Internet has provided us with fresh dimensions of linguistic and stylistic variation, and provided new ways of focusing on language use. There is even an up-side to language endangerment: the manifestation of language death on such a scale has sharpened the minds of minority language users wonderfully, and fresh initiatives are now everywhere - not least the one which led to the European Year of Languages in 2001 - to influence public opinion about what linguistic identity means and how it can be fostered. We know that such initiatives are having some success, ironically not least by the growth of organizations designed to protect English - US English in the USA, for example, which in recent decades has been trying to give English official status there. It is a remarkable scenario, certainly, when the world's most dominant language is felt to be in need of official protection. So the potential is present for great things to happen. But, as always with revolutions, it is up to individuals to capitalize on them. And that is what a house of languages can help us all to do.

Language is too important to be left to the professionals - I speak as a professional linguist. It is also too complicated to be left to the amateurs - I speak as someone often in need of other people's expertise to answer my linguistic questions. We are all amateurs most of the time. What a house of language does is provide a visiting point where the professional and the amateur can meet. It offers



the opportunity to relate academic expertise and everyday experience. The linguistic problems we have to deal with are so large and unfamiliar - and often so expensive to solve - that only a combined effort will address them.

The scale and unfamiliarity I refer to arises directly out of the revolutionary scenario I outlined earlier. It is the nature of revolutions to present people with the need for new paradigms. And currently we are experiencing a linguistic revolution in which old models are being replaced by new ones, and a transitional period which is inevitably one of great uncertainty. People are unclear about the role of a truly global *lingua franca*, because they have never experienced one before. They worry about the impact of English on their own language. They are seeing the loss of languages around the world, and are not sure what to do. And they are faced with new and unexplored technologies which they have limited experience in handling. Teachers, at the cutting edge of language work, routinely bemoan their plight. A typical remark in English Language Teaching goes like this: 'In the old days there was American English and British English, and I knew where I was; now, with Australian, Indian, South African, and other Englishes, I've no idea where I am'. But everyone, not just teachers, is faced with the uncertainties of a rapidly changing linguistic world.

Even some of our most cherished linguistic notions have to be revised, such as the fundamental distinction between 'native' and 'non-native', or between 'first language', 'second language', and 'foreign language'. To take an example of the latter: babies are now being born all over the world who are being taught language by parents of mixed-language backgrounds, for whom English is an essential *lingua franca*. In other words the babies are going to be learning 'English as a foreign language' as a mother-tongue. Such developments can take even language professionals by surprise. What professionals need to appreciate is the even greater levels of rethinking which have to take place among the general public, where, for example, the notion that monolingualism is the norm is surprisingly pervasive (especially in those countries which have a recent history of colonialism). Among politicians and administrators there is a natural tendency to look for neat and simple solutions - devising formulae, for example, about how many languages it is desirable for a country to teach or work towards. But notions of L1 + 1, L1 + 2, or whatever, bear little relationship to the real world, where people operate with as many languages as they need and at a variety of levels.



To cope with revolutions we need a strategy which is sufficiently flexible to integrate many levels and types of users. Its focus has to be on 'ordinary families' and on children at home, because this is where languages are most solidly acquired, but homes have to be seen in the context of communities (real or virtual) to avoid isolationism, and so local community initiatives need to play their part. It is this local focus which provides a means of integrating the different approaches that people use when they are engaged in language planning. In a previous talk here in Barcelona I discussed the role of the arts as a crucial strategy in focussing public attention on linguistic issues, especially in relation to minority languages. I also drew attention to the revitalising potential of the Internet. The home is the only place where both of these factors are routinely present. The appreciation of art begins at home, from the simplest forms of home decor and body art to more advanced forms of music, pictures, story-telling, and film. The appreciation of Internet technology is increasingly based in the home, and will significantly grow with the spread of broadband communication. So it is in the home and local community where the effects of the linguistic revolution are going to be most apparent. The traditional focus, of course, has been on the educational system, so it may be on the issue of the *context* of learning where the greatest amount of rethinking will eventually need to take place.

This rethinking has hardly begun. The professionalism is not yet in place which can fuel these developments. Let me repeat my argument about the role of the arts in relation to multilingualism, minority languages, and other areas of evolving linguistic identity. Here my premise is this: within a country, people do not change their minds, or develop positive attitudes about endangered languages, for example, just by being given information; the arguments need to capture their emotions, and art forms are the main way in which this can happen. But there are still far too few poems, plays, novels, and other genres in which general notions of language identity and loss provide the theme. Nor should music, painting, sculpture, dance, and other forms of artistic expression be left out of consideration. But I know of no operas, ballets, fantasias, jazz compositions, or pop songs on the theme of language loss. Nor have the visual arts been involved. I know of no paintings.

I have found one sculpture - a piece of work which was displayed in New York and London in the late 1990s. There is a report, probably apocryphal, of an event which took place when the explorer



Alexander von Humboldt was searching for the source of the Orinoco, in South America, in 1801. He met some Carib Indians who had recently exterminated a neighbouring tribe (possibly a Maypuré group) and captured some of their domesticated parrots. The parrots still spoke words of the now extinct language, and von Humboldt – so the story goes – was able to transcribe some of them. Having heard this story, Rachel Berwick, professor of sculpture at Yale University, saw its intriguing possibilities, and constructed an artwork based upon it: she designed a special enclosure in which were displayed two Amazon parrots who had been trained to speak some words from Maypuré, and this was then exhibited at various venues. By all accounts, the venture focused the mind wonderfully. So, if sculpture, why not music? Why is there not yet a symphony for dying languages? Has there been a pop concert in support of Language Aid? It would be good to see some of these initiatives in the opening decades of the new millennium. But they need to be planned for. A house of languages can help to focus public interest in a way that few other organizations can. The difference between 'house' and 'home' is very small.

Art is of course 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, such as the eisteddfod tradition in Wales. A strong literary tradition can be a source of great prestige, not only within the indigenous community but also among the society at large. Even in the case of art forms where there is no linguistic element, such as dancing, language can take advantage of their popularity: no dance has yet been invented which has not been given a name or an interpretation, and language then comes to the fore. But, in talking about art forms, it is crucial to include all sectors of society. In a situation of endangerment, there is no room for a misconceived elitism or anti-elitism. There has to be inclusiveness, simply because not everyone in the endangered community will find everything equally appealing. The critical dimension is, once again, age. The kind of activities promoted by the long-established cultural festivals can appear old-fashioned or parochial to the community's youth. On the other hand, the kind of activity which interests the young can be dismissed by the older generation as involving a lowering of standards. Without mutual interest and tolerance, a community can find itself torn by internal conflict, and energies which should be harnessed in the same direction come to be dissipated. If a house of languages is to succeed, it must find ways of attracting people of all ages, in an atmosphere of mutual respect.



The three main strands of the linguistic revolution - to do with globalization, endangerment, and technology - are manifestly present at the heart of the European experience, and one of the undoubted benefits of the European Year of Languages was to focus public attention on what is taking place, to reduce the reluctance and apathy surrounding language awareness, and to promote fresh initiatives celebrating linguistic diversity in all its forms. In an earlier publication, I reduced the initiatives which I considered most desirable to ten, and these are perhaps worth recapitulating here, for they are especial relevance to the many languages - such as Catalan and Swedish - which are neither dominant nor endangered. I would like to call them 'ten commandments', but that notion has already been appropriated, and - despite my beard - I don't think I have the clout to command anyone to do anything. Ten recommendations, merely, therefore. Or, putting it in terms of today's meeting: ten themes which should fill the rooms of a house of languages.

I The top priority has to be a greater concern for endangered languages. The concern can take many forms - aside from doing the actual work of linguistic documentation - such as lobbying for political support, providing help at community level, and fund-raising. All speakers, and especially those whose languages are not in any danger (at present), should be reflecting on this, and doing something about it.

II Close behind comes a greater concern for minority languages, even if they are not in any global sense endangered. All languages express the identity of the people who speak them, but for those who find themselves to be a small part of a large community, the role of language is especially important. They want to see their language treated with respect by the dominant culture; they want opportunities (which usually means funding) to use their language in public and see it valued. It would be intellectually dishonest to take pride in the achievements of one's own language while denying the same opportunity to others.

III We need to promote a greater concern for all accents and dialects within a language. Here we are talking about a readiness to accept the variety of forms a language takes as it varies from one part of a country to another. We do not have to personally like all these forms, any more than we have to like all kinds of music or literature. But we should not go round, as many have done, condemning some (usually urban) dialects as ugly, rough, or slovenly, or their speakers as unintelligent or criminal. 'Eternal vigilance' was once the watchword of a puristic and



prescriptively minded linguistic age, which was steadily losing its appeal in the closing years of the twentieth century. The watchword of the new century should be 'eternal tolerance'.

IV At the same time, we need to promote a greater concern for the expressive range of a language. This means valuing all varieties and styles in a language, whether spoken or written, formal or informal, regional or social, domestic or professional. It means being concerned over standards of excellence, while recognizing that language reflects many needs and activities. One of the purposes of language is to express identity; another is to foster mutual intelligibility. This means that language has to be clear, care has to be taken to avoid ambiguity, and subtleties of expression have to be carefully managed. There has long been a concern in schools for children to master a standard language, in which the focus is on the sounds, grammar, and vocabulary that facilitate national (and, these days, international) intelligibility. In the past, this was all too often seen as a replacement for a local dialect. The new mindset sees the value of both.

V We need to become more multilingual in our thinking, and in our abilities. There are still too many cultures which are monolingual in temperament. These, ironically, are the disadvantaged ones. Although culturally dominant, reflecting their colonial pasts, they are missing out intellectually by failing to make a second language a routine part of growing up. Let us recall the words of American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'As many languages as he has, as many friends, as many arts and trades, so many times is he a man'. Or woman. And the benefits, as people are beginning to learn, can be economic as well as personal.

VI We need to accept change in language as a normal process. This means we should stop seeing it as decay and deterioration, and complaining about it to the press, the prime minister, or whoever we hope will listen. There is probably more time wasted on this issue than on any other in the world of language. Language change is inevitable, continuous, universal, and multidirectional. Languages do not get better or worse, when they change. They just - change.

VII We need to show greater concern for those who are having difficulties learning their mother-tongue - whether for medical, psychological, or other reasons. As many as ten per cent of the child population can be affected by handicaps in listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Deafness, cleft palate, dyslexia, and language delay are just some of the conditions which form the world of



another cadre of language professionals, the speech and language pathologists - the logopedists, the orthophonists. That is a world where there is a shortage of funding too.

VIII We need to show greater concern for those who have lost their ability to use a mother-tongue in which they were once proficient. This is the language pathology world also, but now we are talking about the linguistic consequences of strokes, and other forms of brain damage, among the adult population. Aphasia is one of the best-known syndromes.

IX We need to bring the study of language and literature closer together. All too often, schools, universities, and language-teaching institutions introduce a sharp boundary between the two domains. ‘The language’ is taught in one class; ‘the literature’ in another. It is time to allow more language awareness into the literature class, and more literary examples into the language class. Both sides, after all, have a focus on creativity. The creation of new words and sentences is how a language develops and changes; the creation of new discourses is how literature does.

X Finally, we need to appreciate, truly appreciate, the value of language in human development and society. Languages should be thought of as national treasures, and treated accordingly.

There is obviously a great deal still to be done, and I believe that a house of languages is an ideal way of maintaining the momentum that was initiated in 2001. The European Year of Languages arrived at a particularly important juncture, following a revolutionary decade and preceding a century of unpredictable consequence. It gave many of us the motivation to start the process of thinking things through in fresh ways. The house of languages is one of the first fruits of this new climate, and points the way forward. The future, indeed, starts here.

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