

| A London Language Museum

by David Crystal

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It ought to be possible for human beings to develop their interest in any area of knowledge by encountering it in the form of a museum; and for most subjects, this is the case. If I am interested in natural history, science, ships, aeroplanes, dolls, toys and a host of other topics, I can in many cities enter a building devoted to my subject and spend a happy day of exploration among like-minded people, benefiting from curatorial expertise. But this is not possible with the most human-defining of subjects: language. Apart from sections in major museums devoted to individual linguistic contributions (such as the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum), language has been largely neglected as a museological domain.

Perhaps it is the word *museum* which has been the problem. In the context of an International Year of Languages, it is the living, changing diversity of languages which is the focus, and this has been the driving force behind the development of modern linguistics, with its emphasis on speech and signing as well as writing. *Museum*, with its traditional connotations (in English) of preservation of antiquities, sits

uncomfortably with this vision. That is why initiatives for language-based collections have searched for alternative metaphors, such as house, gallery, city, hall, town, street and world.

World was the label chosen to capture the concept in early 1996, when a museum-like development in London was first proposed. The initiative came from the British Council, which had been discussing ways of marking the millennium. The original concept was for a 'Museum of English', but this was soon broadened to a 'World of Language' (WOL), avoiding the Anglocentricity of the earlier idea. I was approached to develop the content in late-1996, and took up the challenge enthusiastically. It was a natural progression, it seemed to me, from *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), which had as its driving force the colourful illustration of language in all its variety. I wrote that book because a teenage relative asked me if I could recommend 'a book on language with pictures in it', and I couldn't. Ten years after that book appeared, I found myself imagining a similar relative asking me if I could recommend 'a museum on language with exhibits in it', and I couldn't. With computers an increasing part of our everyday lives, along with technological advances in phonetics and linguistics, all kinds of interactive possibilities suggested themselves, allowing auditory, animated and tactile perspectives which a static visual medium could not possibly achieve.

It was plain that the ordinary, everyday fascination with language had no outlet in the public domain. I have never met anyone who is not curious about language, in some shape or

form – the origins of a place-name, the meaning of a surname, children's language acquisition, children without language ('wolf-children'), the nature of swearing, changes in accents and dialects, the etymology of words, the origins of language itself... The list of intriguing questions is endless, and much of my publishing, broadcasting and lecturing energy since the 1970s has been devoted to answering them. The WOL initiative, it seemed to me, was an ideal solution: it would point these questioners in the direction of a public space where they could encounter these answers in an exciting and memorable way.

My response was also partly motivated by purely practical considerations. Since publishing the *Encyclopedia*, people had begun to send me things. For example, an old gentleman from the north of England had been a collector of local dialect words all his life, and he wanted to leave them in a safe public place for others to enjoy. Where might he send them? I would get requests of this kind every few weeks – and still do. A language museum would be the obvious solution – if one existed. It would be a place where people could leave their linguistic footprints.

The World of Language

My conception of a WOL called for four main 'spaces': the world of speech, the world of writing, the world of sense, and the world of languages and their study/practice. The content documentation is now lodged at CILT (the Centre for Information and Language Teaching) at the National Centre for Languages, in London.

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The world of speech

The speech world was the introductory space, because speech is fundamental to language: we learn to speak before we learn to write, we speak far more than we write, and many languages of the world exist only in spoken form. It included all aspects of phonetics (articulatory, acoustic and auditory) and phonology, pure and applied (e.g. in speech synthesis, speech pathology and forensic science), present-day and historical, acquisitional (in children) and variational (accents). A zoological perspective related human speech to animal sounds. Cutting-edge technology enabled people to experience spoken language in a range of interactive settings (e.g. How does speech sound in the womb? How does your voice age? Which areas of the brain are active when you speak?). Due to the project's location, there was a special focus on the sounds of English around the country and the world, and also on the sounds of the languages spoken in Britain. An additional focus was on signing and other alternatives to speech.

The world of writing

The writing world was the second main space. This included all aspects of graphetics (the role of the eye, hand and brain in graphic communication) and graphology, pure and applied (e.g. in dyslexia and forensic science), present-day and historical (the evolution of the writing systems of the world), acquisitional (learning to read, write and spell) and variational (e.g. in dialects and poetry). As the project was to take place in the UK, there was a special focus on the English writing system and its development. Another focus was the way in which writing was being handled by different technologies (e.g. typing, printing and

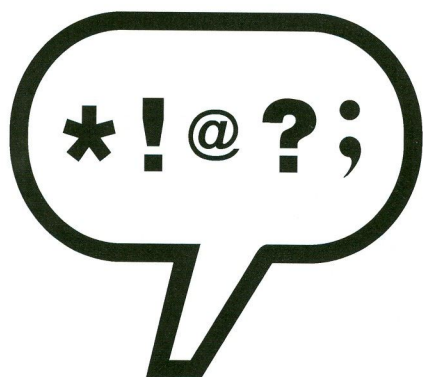


12. The dilapidated building in Southwark, London, which had been identified as a likely site for the World of Language project.

electronic). A further focus was literacy and illiteracy.

The world of sense

The world of sense was the third main space. Both spoken and written language share certain properties of language structure, notably grammar, vocabulary and discourse (i.e. language as used in connected speech and writing). This included the way these properties work and are



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13. The striking logo of the World of Language project, as used during its planning stage.

studied (e.g. in grammars and dictionaries), and on the way they combine to produce the recognizable varieties and styles of language (e.g. the language of science, law, religion, advertising and the internet). This was the world in which many topics of everyday interest were treated, such as slang, taboo language, text-messaging, jargon, how children learn their grammar and vocabulary, the history of words, word-creation and the origins of place-names. English was the primary focus in this space, including global variations in the language.

The world of languages

The world of languages was the fourth main space. All the properties presented in the first three spaces turn up in each of the 6,500 or so world languages in the world. The focus here was thus on language diversity and multilingualism, and on the various structural differences between languages. All the world's languages would be presented and

classified (as far as information allowed), with some comment about their status (e.g. whether official, minority or endangered), with a country-by-country analysis. The systematic study of language and languages (linguistics) was introduced, along with other professionalisms (lexicography, speech therapy, translation, interpreting, language teaching, etc). All visitors would be allowed to contribute to WOL's language (and dialect) bank.

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Planning and its outcome

13 During 1996 and 1997, the WOL concept was carried forward by Roger Bowers, a senior British Council officer acting as a consultant to the Council's Director General. By the end of 1996, several meetings had taken place between interested parties in government, education, publishing, technology and the media, including an important scene-setting conference at the Royal Society chaired by the Director-General, Sir John Hanson. The Council provided the funds for the initial meetings and the associated planning. An early step was to identify a possible location: various sites in London were investigated, and a front-runner emerged in Southwark, right next to Shakespeare's Globe theatre on the South Bank, which was nearing completion at the time. Several discussions about collaboration took place both with Southwark Borough Council and the Globe trustees. There was even a suggestion that we might locate WOL in the Globe undercroft (now hosting the Globe's own exhibition).

A detailed business plan was drawn up, with full marketing and IT and design specifications, which forecast viability after five

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years. The project required a start-up sum of £20 million, with 60 per cent of the costs coming from partnership funding, and 40 per cent from lottery funding. A wide range of partners had been approached and were interested in being involved, including ICL, British Telecom, the British Tourist Authority, Cambridge University Press, language-teaching and -examining bodies, and several government departments. An application was made to the Millennium Commission in November 1996, and was well received. But in 1997 something else was happening in the UK: the proposal for the Millennium Dome was approved by the new Labour government, and as the scale of that project became apparent, and the estimates for the Dome costs virtually doubled, it quickly became clear that all other initiatives were going to be sidelined. Our application to the Millennium Commission was turned down in March 1997. The British Council and some of its partners funded further exploratory work for a while, but with no serious levels of public money available, the project was unable to continue.

With the British Council no longer able to provide momentum, Roger Bowers (who had recently retired from the Council) formed a company (World of Language Limited) to take the project forward and retain all relevant documentation and designs. A website was set up, which attracted significant interest (its online mailing list reached 1,000 by the end of 2000), and a promotional brochure and CD was produced. A US opportunity was explored, and for a time there was a chance that a WOL might be created in Washington rather than in London. But the lack of even basic maintenance levels of funding was a crippling handicap, and eventually all attempts to

develop a London initiative ceased and the website became dormant.

Other initiatives

A good idea does not die, even though it remains on the shelf; and during the late 1990s I lost no opportunity to keep promoting the notion of a WOL to anyone who cared to listen, not least in relation to the impending European Year of Languages in 2001. At the same time, other organizations were beginning to explore the possibilities. A Linguistics Educational Museum was developing at the University of Kiev. The European Centre for Modern Languages at Graz, Austria, was proposing a *Maison des Langues* – a virtual house of languages – as a contribution to ‘Graz 2003 – cultural capital of Europe’. And an exhibit on language and communication was going to be part of the Universal Forum of Cultures, planned for Barcelona in 2004. Other, small-scale exhibitions were being planned as a part of larger enterprises, such as the Languages and Cultures space at the Heureka Museum in Finland, and the permanent Languages exhibition at the Japanese National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku), Osaka.

The only concrete development of the WOL initiative came in early 1998, when the Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie in Paris, in collaboration with the British Council in France, proposed a proposed major six-month millennium exhibition on language with a focus on children (of around age 10 upwards). A design competition was conducted and exciting proposals received from the UK and France. However, to take the project forward a UK contribution (of £200K) would have been needed, and as this was not

available (due once more to the Dome), this development did not proceed either. The Cité eventually held an exhibition on the theme of water instead. The content outline of the Cité Language project is worth recording nonetheless, as it illustrates the kind of adaptation of the WOL concept which can be made to suit individual settings.

In this interpretation, the exhibition started with the linguistic world with which children are familiar, then moved 'outwards' to worlds less familiar. The space was divided into three main areas, dealing with a possible twenty themes:

A. Language in me – how did I learn to speak and write? (Ontogeny)

1. How did I learn to talk, and what happens when I talk?
2. How did I learn to write, and what happens when I write?
3. How did I learn to use words, and what other words are there to learn?
4. How did I learn to use grammar, and what more is there to learn?
5. Which regional accent/dialect do I speak, and what others are there?
6. Which varieties of language do I know, and what others are there?
7. How can I use language in exciting and enjoyable ways?

B. Language in my society – where has it come from? Where is it going? (Phylogeny)

8. How did human beings learn to speak?
9. How did human beings learn to write?

10. Where did my language (French) come from?
11. How did people sound in olden days?
12. Where has my language travelled around the world?
13. Why can't some people speak or write?

C. Language in the world – what other languages do I need? (Multilingualism)

14. What other languages will I hear in France?
15. What other languages will I hear in the European Union?
16. How many languages are there, and where will I find them?
17. How many languages can I learn, and can I try now?
18. Why will I hear so much English around the world?
19. Why are some languages dying, and how can I help?
20. Can I put my speech/writing/signing into the world language bank?

Finally, an outcome

It was during the Barcelona Forum in May 2004 that the idea for a museum of languages finally came to fruition – but not in London. Linguapax¹ had arranged a conference on Diversity, Sustainability and Peace, and I was asked to deliver a keynote address. My paper, 'Creating a World of Languages',² contained a section in which I put the case, once again, for a language museum. The president of Catalonia, Pasqual Maragall, was in the audience, and the idea caught his attention. As a result, the world's first House of Languages

(La Casa de les Llengües)³ will become a physical reality, probably in 2010. The first travelling exhibition associated with this project, on the languages of the Mediterranean littoral, was opened in Lleida in December 2007.⁴

What are the differences between WOL and the Casa de les Llengües (CL)? It should first be noted that there are in principle as many different interpretations of the language museum concept as there are places to realize it. In particular, I would expect each location to pay special attention to the language situation in which it finds itself – for example WOL, within its universal coverage, also emphasized the variety and history of English in the UK, whereas CL will focus on the historical and present-day situation of Catalan and the other languages of Catalonia. But there are many other themes that could provide the primary motivating force for a language museum – historical, literary, social, political, religious and technical, to name just a few.

CL has opted to make its main theme linguistic diversity. Its objectives, as specified in an early planning document,⁵ are: (1) to provide an overview of the world of languages and to disseminate knowledge of them; (2) to drive recognition of egalitarian and equitable multilingualism; and (3) to spread knowledge of languages and linguistic diversity as a value of humanity.

In a later (2007) statement, it defined its mandate as ‘to engage in an international benchmark project to promote awareness of the world’s linguistic diversity and experiences that

allow for fair, respectful coexistence between languages in multilingual societies.’⁶ The emphasis is thus somewhat different from that presented in WOL, where issues of language diversity and multilingualism were presented in the fourth space (see above), *after* an encounter with a general linguistic perspective. While both projects share a common vision of the importance of linguistic diversity, they approach its presentation in very different ways. This is only to be expected. Given the inevitable restrictions on space in all such buildings, there are bound to be many decisions about the selection of material and the distribution of emphasis. Language is a hugely complex topic to manage in museological terms.

Is there a future for WOL in London?

As part of the forward-planning for CL, a scientific advisory committee was formed, which held its first meeting in Barcelona in July 2006. A number of museum directors made presentations. One of them was Professor Jack Lohman, director of the Museum of London, and also a member of one of the committees advising the body planning the cultural side of the London Olympics in 2012. He felt that a WOL-type enterprise would be an ideal legacy of the Games. The proposal was therefore resuscitated, discussed at a meeting in London at the end of 2006, and put forward for consideration by the appropriate panels in 2007. At the time of writing (early 2008), there has been no response, and the signs are not good, for the escalating costs of the Games are leaving few opportunities for developments in other areas. Remembering the Dome, I have a sense of *déjà-vu*. The arts in Britain, in particular, have been severely curtailed, and I would expect cultural initiatives to be equally

affected. The chances of a development on the scale of WOL being taken up in relation to the Olympics must therefore be regarded as remote.

I will continue to advocate a British WOL, and I have no doubt that in due course fresh opportunities will present themselves – and, given the increasingly multilingual character of many British cities, not necessarily in London. As I said, a good idea does not die, and interest in the project continues to be widespread. In the meantime, it is heart-warming to hear of other initiatives, notably the proposal, discussed at a conference in November 2007,⁷ from the Vigdis Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages to set up a World Language Centre at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik. We are still some way from emulating the art galleries and natural history museums of the world, but with two initiatives in the pipeline, and a great deal of the relevant thinking already completed, the task of establishing similar ventures in other countries will be a great deal easier from now on.

4. The project name is officially Linguamón: see <http://www.linguamon.cat>.
5. 'The House of Languages: The Value of Linguistic Diversity', planning paper from Linguamón, 2006.
6. Presentation to the scientific advisory committee, Barcelona, December 2007.
7. See the report by Peter Austin at http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/elac/2007/11/world_language_centre_conferen.html.

| NOTES

1. Linguapax is an institute that cooperates with different institutions to promote linguistic diversity. The international Linguapax network constitutes seven delegations.

2. The paper was subsequently published in the International Federation of Language Teacher Associations (FIPLV), *World News* 61 (December 2004): 22–35, and is available online at http://www.davidcrystal.com/DC_articles/Langdeath5.pdf.

3. The House of Languages, or Casa de les Llengüens, is an organism originally created by the Autonomous Government of Catalonia, the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia and the Universal Forum of Cultures. Its objective is the promotion of languages.