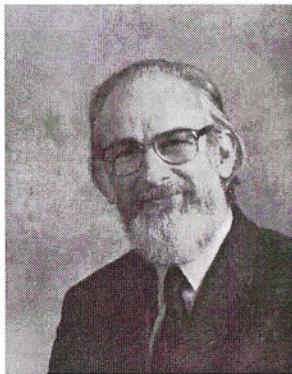


## Creating a world of languages

by David Crystal



There comes a point, in any campaign, when ‘campaign fatigue’ sets in. It typically arrives a decade after the launch, when the originators have used up most of their energy – and probably most of their money – in launching the campaign, when they have come to realize that not everyone in the world shares their vision, and when the real size of the task facing them has become evident. That is when they need conferences, and the more international the conference the better. They need – as the English metaphor goes – to recharge their batteries. And where better to obtain a battery-recharge than in Barcelona?

This conference is timely, therefore. It is just over a decade since the news about the crisis facing the world’s languages became public news, at least among professional linguists. Although I had long been aware of the problem in a general way, it was only after the 1992 International Linguistics Congress in Quebec that I realised the scale of the crisis. That Congress, you may recall, issued a statement calling on UNESCO to respond to the situation as ‘a task of great urgency’. A year later, in November 1993, the General Assembly adopted the ‘Endangered Languages Project’ – including the ‘Red Book of Endangered Languages’. In 1995 the International Clearing House for Endangered Languages was inaugurated at the University of Tokyo. The same year, an Endangered Language Fund was instituted in the USA. The opening statement by the Fund’s committee pulled no punches:

Languages have died off throughout history, but never have we faced the massive extinction that is threatening the world right now. As language professionals, we are faced with a stark reality: Much of what we study will not be available to future generations. The cultural heritage of many peoples is crumbling while we look on. Are we willing to shoulder the blame for having stood by and done nothing?

Also in 1995, the Foundation for Endangered Languages was established in the UK. Its second Newsletter, summarizing the likely prospects, provides an informal estimate of the scale of the problem:

There is agreement among linguists who have considered the situation that over half of the world’s languages are moribund, i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation. We and our children, then, are living at the point in human history where, within perhaps two generations, most languages in the world will die out.

Something truly significant was evidently taking place. There had never, in my recollection, been such a universal upsurge of professional linguistic concern about an aspect of their subject. And since the mid-90s, a significant number of linguists have spent a great deal of time and energy in increasing professional and public awareness, raising funds, and fostering documentation and revitalisation programmes. It has been a very busy ten years. But it is just the beginning.

Ten years on, it is time to take stock, and that is what I think this conference, with its wide-ranging remit of diversity, sustainability, and peace, is all about. I quote from the brochure announcing this conference:

The need to preserve the languages of the world and counter the processes of language shift that are taking place worldwide has become a major concern shared by researchers, scholars and leaders of many language communities.

And again:

This Dialogue is designed to bring together all those interested in the maintenance of linguistic diversity in order to generate fruitful discussions that may be used to impede the current processes of cultural homogenization of the world.

It is an unusual phrasing. The conferences I’ve been to are usually designed to start something happening, not to stop something happening! I would prefer a positive phrasing myself – ‘foster cultural heterogeneity’, perhaps. But the spirit of the statement is clear and, for me at least, uncontentious.

‘Peace’ is the new arrival. A decade ago, if we had carried out one of those word prediction tasks beloved of lexicologists, most people would not have selected it as the word to follow the first two. (I exclude the founders of the Linguapax project, who had been exploring this relationship since the mid-1980s.) Even today, it is an unusual collocation. Try it: what words come to mind? ‘Language diversity, sustainability, and ---’? Documentation, perhaps. Revitalization, perhaps. Money, perhaps. But peace? And yet it is, on reflection, the ideal third element in this lexical trinity. Peacelinguistics. It is a new notion. Type it into Google and you get – zero hits. It asks you ‘Did you mean paralinguistics?’ But it has been in linguistics dictionaries – well, in mine, at least – for a few years. It was not in the first edition of my Penguin *Dictionary of Language*, 1992, but it was certainly in the second, 1999, and I included it in the fifth edition of my *Dictionary for Linguistics and Phonetics*, out last year. It might help to repeat this definition:

A term reflecting the climate of opinion which emerged during the 1990s among many linguists and language teachers, in which linguistic principles, methods, findings and applications were seen as a means of promoting peace and human rights at a global level. The approach emphasizes the value of language diversity and multilingualism, both internationally and intranationally, and asserts the need to foster language attitudes which respect the dignity of individual speakers and speech communities.

Several linguists have been actively involved in promoting this perspective, not least in the language-teaching classroom. Some of them are here. Some, such as the Brazilian professor Francisco Gomes de Matos, have gone so far as to describe themselves explicitly as ‘applied peace linguists’. Thanks to such efforts, the association between ‘diversity’ and ‘peace’ is slowly being established in people’s minds.

With three overviews on our specific topics, one on each day, an introduction to the whole conference must adopt a broader perspective. Let me therefore return to the statement defining the goal of this conference, and turn it into a question. Can ‘researchers, scholars and leaders of many language communities...’ ‘...impede the current processes of cultural homogenization of the world’? I have no trouble answering this question. The answer is, quite simply, no. – But before you send me home, let me immediately add: no, not by ourselves. This is far too big a task for linguists and language leaders alone. We need reinforcements. Where are we to get them from? If we are to aid Linguapax in its aim ‘to bring a linguistic solution to specific issues in the area of peace research, defence of human rights and the promotion of education for democracy’, what must we do? This is a much bigger task than the twin concerns for language documentation and revitalization, which have preoccupied linguists over the past decade. And it will only succeed if we get a significant part of the general public on our side.

The paxlinguistic movement, if we might call it that, is an infant, by comparison with other ecological movements, some of which have been with us for over a century. For example, the National Audubon Society in the US was founded in 1866: we have been bird-watching for nearly 150 years. For world heritage sites, we have the highly successful UNESCO programme, begun in 1972. Greenpeace, the year before, 1971. The World Wildlife Fund, 1961. The World Conservation Union, 1948. It took over 30 years before this Union was able to establish a World Conservation Strategy (1980), which led to the principles laid down in the 1991 document *Caring for the Earth*. With those parallels, linguists should expect to have something ready for the world in about 2022.

It takes a while for new social movements to make an impact on public consciousness, but there is no doubting the success of these measures of the past. I doubt whether any educated person today is unaware of species loss, at the botanical and zoological level. Everyone is familiar with at least some of the arguments supporting the need to sustain biodiversity. We need to learn from their experience. So how did they do it? There were three main strategies. They got awareness of their concerns into the media, the school, and the home. And this is what we have to do too. I have ten specific measures in mind.

### **I is for Internet**

There is one big thing on our side. The time-frames of the past are no longer parallels. 1991 was a significant year for public awareness movements and

foundations, for that was the year in which the World Wide Web was born. The Internet is a means through which anyone, even the smallest language-consciousness-raising organization, can bring its aims before the world in a way that was simply unavailable to people before. It is already heart-warming to see the way in which this revolutionary technology is being employed to foster linguistic diversity, ranging from a proliferation of Websites in minority or endangered languages to the establishment of language-specific chatrooms – virtual speech communities. But – there is always a but – there is a problem. The Internet is still not available to a huge proportion of the human race. In many places there is still not even enough electricity to run a computer. In a suburb of Johannesburg, for example, there is one of those huge freight containers, the kind you see being transported by trains or large trucks. It has been kitted out with computer terminals – about twenty of them – and there is always a queue of people waiting to use them. But there is no mains electricity supply. A hand-cranked generator provides enough electricity to power – just two of the computers at any one time.

Johannesburg is not unusual. Although there have been huge improvements in Internet access all over the developing world, the Internet Society statistics make sobering reading. All 54 countries and territories in Africa now have Internet access in their main cities<sup>1</sup> but as of mid-2003 only 6 million out of 816 million use a PC, with only 5 million of these on the Internet – less than 1 per cent. Latin America has seen a dramatic growth in Internet access, in the past five years, but it is still only 60 million out of a total population of 540 million – 11 per cent<sup>2</sup>. The significance of such statistics, of course, is that the areas of least growth reflect the areas of greatest linguistic diversity and endangerment. And it is not only the availability of electricity and computers which is the issue. The issue of access time needs to be addressed, especially when it comes to downloading multimedia material (such as sound files, which we might imagine are critical to our subject) or ensuring low lag response times, to maintain the dynamic of a chatroom interaction. Here the situation is very poor. In Africa, for example, in 2003 only 16 countries had ISDN connectivity, six had DSL, and only one ADSL.

At least the problem has been noticed. At the end of March this year, there was a meeting in Geneva of the United Nations Information and Technologies Task Force. Its aim was to prepare for a new working group on Internet governance which will contribute to the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society to be held in Tunisia late next year. The needs of the developing world rank high in their agenda. An important strategic step, it seems to me, is to get our linguistic priorities represented on that agenda. And on that basis I identify the first of ten strategic measures which I wish to put before the conference today. As a mnemonic, I use the letter I – which stands for Internet – or Information society, if you prefer.

## Y is for Youth

In my view, the chief reason for the importance of the Internet, in relation to our concerns, is this: it attracts young people, and especially teenagers, in a way that no other medium does. It is, in a word, 'cool'. The role of teenagers to any ecolinguist is patently obvious: they are the parents of the next generation of children, so the sociolinguistic reality of the inter-generational transmission of language depends primarily on them. If they can be enthused about their native languages and language diversity, or have their enthusiasm maintained, we can be optimistic about any scenario for diversity and sustainability. By providing opportunities for language-specific chatrooms, making available multilingual Websites, and doing all the things that the Internet enables us to do, we can make considerable progress. But – there is always a but – it must be done bearing the needs of young people in mind. I would like to think that all of us here are young-minded. But it is an unfortunate fact of life that many people involved in language issues are not. A story from my home country, Wales, will illustrate the problem.

It happened 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*. *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. A few weeks later I was discussing the event in South Africa, where my audience could not think of anything which had given their languages such a high profile. Travel around Johannesburg 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 only English. Speakers of the minority 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. My pop group example left people out there stunned – in admiration and envy.

I told them about the fantastic publicity which had surrounded the event. My audience were even more envious. Then I told them what the publicity had been about, and my African friends couldn't believe it. This was the headline in the Independent: 'Manic Street Preachers' bad language upsets the land of their fathers'. The reason was that the language the pop group had used had been condemned by one Welsh academic as – I quote from the reports I read (27 Sep 1998) – '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.' 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.'

The point of this example is that it is by no means restricted to Wales. It is an issue faced by all minority languages struggling to maintain their identity. I have encountered it in Zimbabwe, Peru, Slovenia, indeed virtually everywhere I have been in recent years – including here in Cataluna. Each of the societies involved consists of young and old, and their attitudes inevitably clash. The desire by young people to use the latest slang conflicts with the attitudes of many older people who want to protect their language against what they perceive to be unwelcome change. The elders of a community may even have established organizations to look after the language – such as in the Academy tradition – and these will certainly be against language change. The viewpoint is one of purism: there is a natural desire to keep a language pure, because that is perceived to be the basis of ancestral identity. It is of course a huge myth. There are no such things as 'pure' languages. All languages display a mixture of influences from the past. Nor has any organization ever succeeded in protecting a language from change – French now is very different from the language as it was spoken when the Academy was established in 1635. Languages always change because societies change. The languages each of us speak now are very different from what they were a century ago, and will be very different again in a century's time. The only languages that do not change are dead ones.

It can be a painful process accepting the fact of language change. But unless this is done, there is no chance of success for a programme of linguistic diversity. I say again: no chance. Because if young people are continually being told by their elders that their speech is inferior, what chance do they have of developing a sense of pride and ownership in their language? It takes a real maturity of vision for elders to see and accept that, alongside the language *they* know and love, there are new varieties emerging which are very different from what they are used to, but which are valued by young people. Elders have to accept that their language will change. They inevitably think of this change as for the worse – every generation thinks that – but they have to accept it, because the future of their language depends on it.

Linguists can try to help elders achieve the wider vision, but it is not easy. It is important to point out that change is neither better nor worse – it is just 'change', meeting the needs of the new generation that speaks it. We can point out that, for example, a language like English has changed more than most, in the past thousand years. It has borrowed words from over 350 languages, and its vocabulary is now 80 per cent non-Germanic. That has not stopped it becoming one of the world's most successful languages ever. But whether we are for or against change, there is nothing one can do to stop it happening. All one can do is try to cope with it – hopefully, without antagonizing the very people in whose hand the future of the language lies.

This is an issue which I believe may be an even bigger danger to language diversity than globalization. A kingdom divided against itself will not stand. This applies to linguistic kingdoms too. We need to have respect for other people's languages, certainly, but we also need to have respect for the diversity within our own language. That is actually much more difficult. If we do not do this, it can be a recipe for disaster, in a minority or endangered language. The bigger danger comes from within. My second recommendation, accordingly, is for language organizations to develop a Youth wing, and to invite representatives to meetings such as this. With no disrespect intended, I see few people here today below the age of...? Perhaps I should move on, and simply use the letter Y, for youth, to remind you of this argument.

### **M is for Movies and Much More...**

Young people are interested in moving pictures – by which I mean everything that they see on screen, including cinema (in the traditional sense), television programmes, cartoons, computer games, arcade games, and much more. We live in a televisual culture, and if our ideas are to have a widespread impact we need to use that culture to foster our initiatives, and to show young people that they can do the same, by making the technology available to them.

Films are the ideal medium for our purposes, because they enable us to see and hear diversity in action. And one of the most promising developments in the past two or three years has been to see a slow but steady growth in cinematic efforts to capture language diversity and endangerment, from film-makers in several parts of the world. One of the most striking comes from here, Barcelona, and is being shown during the Forum: *Ultima Palabra* (The Last Word), a documentary made by Grau Serra and Roger Sagues in 2003 about three endangered languages in Mexico (Lacandon, Popoluca, and Mayo). Another is currently at the pilot stage: *Brazilian Dream*, by Czech film-maker Michael Havas, about the eight remaining speakers of the Krenak language in Brazil – a remarkable story of what one activist can do for a language. But – there is always a but – we are still a long way from what I might call the 'Winged Migration' stage, where a whole 90-minute film devoted to language diversity goes on mainstream release (my allusion is to the name of the award-winning film on bird migration released last year – 90 minutes devoted to no more than birds flying about the planet, but amazingly beautiful and totally compelling). Nonetheless, these films show what can be done.

Film is too powerful a medium, and too useful to us as a medium, to be left to professional film-makers. It needs to be in the hands of the people responsible for the future of language – and once again, that means the young. This makes me reflect on the importance of a digital-storytelling project carried out by my daughter Lucy and a team of young people in 2002 among the rurally isolated Hopi, Navajo, and Gila Indian communities of Arizona. The aim was to equip the young people in these communities with the multimedia skills to

create a series of digital stories. The traditional stories of these communities were in the minds of the elders, but how many young people today are prepared to sit at the feet of the older generation and repeatedly listen to the old stories so that they can be passed on? Nor is it necessary, in an audio and video recording age, for the aural memory to be put under such pressure. The project therefore showed young members of these communities how to use film-making equipment, Web design, photography, and computer animation to tell the stories of their communities – and the interest they elicited from the youngsters was very evident. It was the young people themselves who suggested they find out their own stories, from their own culture, and not just retell the stories they had seen on the television. This was a visionary project. It is based on the notion that, in the not too distant future, we will all be telling our stories in a multimedia environment, through digital text, voice, music, video, animation, and digital imagery.

My third recommendation, accordingly, is to anticipate a multimedia future for linguistic diversity, and to anticipate the problems of storage which this involves. More on this in a moment. For now, let us record an M – not just for movies, but for multimedia.

### **A is for Arts**

The movies are just one of the arts. There are many others, and each can make their contribution to the public awareness of language diversity. Last year, at the UNESCO forum on language endangerment in Paris, I presented an argument for bringing the arts into the centre of our vision. I argued that the arts are the best way of getting any message across, because people pay attention to artists in a way that they do not to academics. I am talking here about all kinds of artist – novelists, poets, dramatists, painters, sculptors, dancers, composers, folk-singers, jazz musicians, pop musicians, photographers, and all the other categories, too numerous to list. For some years now I have been trying to collect examples of artists treating the subject of our conference, and I have found very little – what I did find I reported at the UNESCO meeting. There is no shortage of people celebrating or bemoaning the situation of their individual language, whether it be Catalan, Welsh, Gaelic, Breton, or whatever. But – there is always a but – there is next to nothing from artists prepared to step back and reflect on the world situation as a whole. When did you last encounter a painting on the theme of 'language diversity', or a novel, or a symphony, or a ballet? We must never underestimate the power and reachability of the artistic medium. In the preface to his novel *Coningsby*, Benjamin Disraeli said, 'Fiction, in the temper of the times, stands the best chance of influencing opinion'.

It does not take such major works as a symphony to attract public interest. An example of a small-scale work, highly effective, was the living sculpture produced by Rachel Berwick, which some of you may have seen in New York or London in 1997-8. It was based on an event said to have taken 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. Approaching this work for the first time, you are nonplussed. Once you read the explanation, you look at the parrots with awe, and wait to hear some words. You do not forget the experience.

My next recommendation is therefore this: every conference devoted to language diversity should commission an artwork of some kind to symbolize its content. It would, in its recorded form – whether on paper or electronic – be a permanent reminder to conference delegates as well as a means of spreading the message of the conference to others. And my reminder of this point to you is letter A – for Arts.

#### **A is also for Awards**

But Arts related to Awards. Whether we like it or not, we live in an age of competitions and awards, and these produce some of the most watched programmes on television. Who is not aware of this year's Oscar-winners? Who in our newly extended Europe does not know of the Eurovision Song Contest? Not only are there Oscars, there are Grammys, Emmies, Golden Globes, Bookers, Pulitzers, Goncourts, ... We seem to be obsessed with awards, but they work. The annual award of the Turner prize in Britain, in its often controversial decisions, has generated an extraordinary amount of discussion about the nature of visual art.

The point hardly needs labouring, so let me make it briefly. I made it last year at UNESCO, but – there is always a but – it seems to have fallen on deaf ears. Still, if an idea is worth saying it is worth saying twice, so let me repeat it. There needs to be an annual prize for artistic achievement in relation to language diversity, to be announced perhaps on World Language Day (26 September). Let there be something, anything, concrete, to focus public attention on the language crisis. A dimension of this kind, I believe, would complement our professional linguistic activities, and ultimately aid them, for public awareness and sympathy is prerequisite if we are to alter the intellectual, emotional, and financial climate within which we have to work. I therefore add a second letter A to my collection.

#### **H is for Home**

Whatever the public domains in which we carry out our language consciousness-raising activities, we have to reach the private domains if we are

to be successful. Think, each of you, of the issues you find most important, and reflect on how they have a presence in your homes. If you are a religious person, you will doubtless have some spiritual reminder in the form of an artefact, picture, symbol, or space. If you are into politics, you may well have a picture of the prime minister – either to put flowers around or to throw darts at – or at least some party paraphernalia to hang on your wall. If you are an animal enthusiast, you will probably have some pictures or models of animals – maybe even some real animals. I know a lady who collects owls – pictures and ornaments, I mean, not the real things. It is a blessing, because whenever she has a birthday everyone knows what to get her – another owl. My question: if you are into language diversity, sustainability, and peace, what do you collect? What do you hang on your wall? What tells visitors to your home about your interest? What do they give you, when they want to please you? I look around the room in which I am writing this paper, and I see: a poster from the European Year of Languages – you may remember the one, with about 40 languages on it; there is also a display of magnetic words attached to the filing cabinet – the sort where you can rearrange the words and make up messages (Elizabethan messages, in this case, as they are all words from Shakespeare); around the corner is a print in Egyptian hieroglyphic. Now I don't want you to give you the impression that walking into our house is like entering a language laboratory. We have other art too. But nobody entering our house can be left in any doubt about what interests my wife and I most.

The link with my previous point is obvious. The artists are the people, more than any other, who actually get messages into our homes on a day-to-day basis. They do it in all kinds of mutually reinforcing ways – whether it be via a radio or television programme, a CD or DVD, a computer game, a wall decoration or painting or photograph, a novel, a postcard, or a text-message poem (currently one of the coolest of artistic mediums among the young). There are so many opportunities, but – there is always a but – so few have yet been exploited. We need to exploit them – and at all levels, including the most mundane. Where are the birthday cards related to language diversity? Where are the Christmas cards (if that is an occasion you celebrate)? Where are the calendars? Charity, an English proverb says, begins at home. We must adapt that. It should be: Diversity begins at home.

So I add H to my letter collection, as a reminder of home. Probably in each of the places where we work there is some linguistic subject-matter adorning the walls. My recommendation is that we bring some of it home (with permission, of course!).

#### **E is for Education**

From a child's point of view – and we must always remember the importance of youth – home is only one dimension of existence. The other is school. Education is of critical importance in what we are trying to do. We need to get

the issue into the school curricula, and into routine classroom experience. I mean by this that it should be an obligatory part of the school curriculum to deal with the topic of this conference, and that it should be a regular topic considered in school assemblies, open-days, exhibitions, and suchlike. Art projects can help here too. I have seen a whole art exhibition by children on the theme of wildlife extinction. It made front-page news in our local paper. Why not an exhibition on language extinction?

The subject-matter of language is making fresh progress in schools these days. In the UK, for example, the English Language syllabus that children may take at age 16 (for their Advanced Level exam) contains a great deal on language change, diversity, and endangerment. But – there is always a but – age 16 is too late; awareness of the biological crisis is in schools at age seven. It should be the same with language. It is not too abstract a subject. I have heard seven-year-olds debating the language crisis, thanks to a skilled presentation by their teacher. All teachers should be doing this, and we need to be helping them, by providing materials and examples of excellence in practice. We are used to writing about language diversity for adults. How many of us have ever written on language diversity for children?

My seventh recommendation is therefore to add an obligatory educational dimension to our thinking. My aide-memoire is a letter E.

#### **T is for Terminus**

‘We are used to writing about language diversity for adults’, I have just said. That is true. But what do we do with what we have written when we have written it? To focus this point, let me quote from an email I received last year – one of many such messages or phone calls that come through to me – as, I expect, to many of you:

I’m writing a piece for our local paper on multilingualism / language death / endangered languages / language diversity... and was wondering if you could recommend some interesting language situations which have been written up, or some good photographic sources...

Where do we send such a person? Or do you spend your time, as I do, trying to remember what you said last time you got such a message, or scrabbling around in your email inbox or filing cabinet looking for that brilliant summary you recall once compiling? We shouldn’t have to be doing this. Nor should our enquirers have to be ringing randomly around, hoping for leads. For them – as well as for us – it is an immensely time-wasting and expensive operation. They – and we – should not have to be starting from scratch each time.

There needs to be an international Central Office of Information – and there isn’t one. We need to work towards establishing a public depository, such as exists in the book world, in many countries, for copies of works to do with language diversity, sustainability, and peace. It would contain copies of radio programmes, magazine articles, interviews with last speakers and community

leaders, stock footage of communities – anything relevant. It would also contain a stock of memorable, quotable statements from writers, pop-singers, film-stars, and others in the public eye – because whatever you and I might say about language diversity, we know we are nothing compared with a sound-bite on the subject from David Beckham.

We need a central location of some kind for people to visit, email, or phone. In some countries, there are already local organizations that provide such a focus: in the UK, CILT, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research is a splendid example. But – there is always a but – this sort of initiative needs to be part of a worldwide network, in which channels are made available to enable the people who do the writing and speaking – that’s you and me – to centralize what they have said. It is not for our own benefit. The principle is simple: once we have managed to get the general public – in the form of journalists, politicians, and others – interested in what we are up to, we must make their job easy for them, by giving them the texts that they need. We need to compile an archive or library of metadata on language diversity, sustainability, and peace. We need to give our enquirers a known point of call, an end-point, a terminus. I add letter T for terminus to my list, as a reminder.

#### **W is for World of Language**

But why stop there? I firmly believe that language is just as important as any other domain of human life. I therefore think it ought to be given the same kind of public presence that other domains of knowledge receive. If you are visiting London (or many another major city), and you are interested in science, where might you go, to follow-up your interest? The Science Museum, at least. And if you are interested in Natural History? The Natural History Museum? And art? The Tate Gallery. And Shakespeare? Shakespeare’s Globe. And languages? Why, the World of Language, of course.

Only we have a problem. There *is* no World of Language. No Language Museum, or Gallery, or whatever you would like to call it. For other subjects, as I’ve said, we can feed our interest by visiting an appropriate museum, exhibition hall, gallery, arena, or suchlike space. Every major city has an art gallery of some kind, or a natural history museum. But there is no space where people can go to see how language works, how it is used, and how languages evolve; no space where they can see presented the world’s linguistic variety; no public place where they can meet like-minded people and reflect on language diversity, sustainability, and peace.

I mention the World of Language, because this was an idea which was being promoted during the late 1990s in the UK. This would have been a multi-storey building, the first of its kind, with floors devoted to the world of speech, the world of writing, the world of meaning, the world of languages, and the world of language study. A building had even been identified, in Southwark, right next to Shakespeare’s Globe. The plans had reached an advanced stage, with the

support of the British Council, and all that was required was a small tranche of government funding to get the project off the ground. Things were looking promising. But – there is always a but – then the government had a better idea. It was called the Millennium Dome.

The money which was wasted on the Dome project would have supported twenty ‘worlds of language’. We still have none. Abroad, others have come up with similar ideas. The various projects have a variety of names, such as ‘the language city’, and ‘the town as a linguistic landscape’. A few already exist, but on a very small scale, such as the Kiev Language Educational Museum. In several countries, the subject of language forms a part of a broader remit, such as at the Heureka Museum in Finland and the Japanese National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. Many museums, of course, including some in the UK, have sections devoted to the history of writing. And there are also several virtual projects, such as the Virtual Museum of American Linguistic Heritage, and ‘The House of Languages’, an initiative proposed a few years ago by the European Centre for Modern Languages. But all projects suffer from a lack of finance, and few have got past the proposal stage. Despite the avowedly fundamental role of language in relation to human society and thought, there is an extraordinary reluctance to give it the public educational treatment it demands.

We still await the arrival of a World of Language. We should be fighting for one, in each country. So I add a W to my list, as a reminder.

### **R is for Resources**

In all of this, I hear you think, there is the unspoken R word – resources. Of course: this is the biggest ‘but’ of all. No ecological project ever succeeded without cash. And it is critical to the success of any campaign for language diversity, sustainment, and peace that we turn the ideological arguments into economic ones. I make only two points, by way of conclusion.

First, it is not as expensive as we might think, to foster a climate of language diversity and sustainability. The initial support needed to get the World of Languages proposal off the ground was only £20 million. A six-month presence planned to take place at the Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie in Paris would only have cost about half a million (pounds). Or take the case of the 3000 most endangered languages. It was estimated a few years ago, by the Foundation for Endangered Languages, that a figure of around \$55,000 per language would provide a basic grammar and dictionary for a language that had received negligible documentation, assuming two years of work by one linguist. Another estimate suggested that we would need to allow a linguist three years, and there would then not be much change from \$200,000, after taking into account a salary, fees for indigenous language consultants, travel, equipment, accommodation, publication of the findings, and the provision of basic facilities for revitalization. Another linguist took an even broader view, anticipating in-depth studies, the development of an audio-visual archive, and a wider range of

publications and teaching materials, concluding that the estimate per language would be more like 15 years and \$2 million.<sup>4</sup> Conditions vary so much that it is difficult to generalize, but – looking for common ground between these figures – a figure of \$65,000 per year per language cannot be far from the truth. If we devoted that amount of effort over three years for each of the 3,000 cases referred to in Chapter 1, we would be talking about some \$585 million. That may seem like a lot of money; but, to put it in perspective, it is equivalent to just over one day’s OPEC oil revenues (in an average year). Or a seventy-fifth of the worth of the richest man in America.

And how do we quantify the cost of peace? It is certainly easy to quantify the cost of war. For example, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office in 2003 estimated<sup>5</sup> that the cost of a war in Iraq would be \$9-13 billion for the initial deployment of troops, \$6-9 billion per month for conducting the war, \$5-7 billion for returning forces to the US, and \$1-4 billion for the temporary occupation of Iraq. This was without ‘unknown factors’. So we might estimate that this ‘local war’ has cost, a year on, somewhere between \$87 and 132 billion. Beside such figures, the cost of linguistic diversity is minuscule. You could set up 4000 Worlds of Language for that.

So, I add an R to my list of letters, stand back, and look at them.

Internet  
Young  
Multimedia  
Arts  
Awards  
Home  
Education  
Terminus  
World of Language  
Resources

They do not make sense as they are, but with a little sleight-of-hand they can be re-ordered to form the word AMRYWIAETH, which is the word for ‘diversity’ in Welsh. In English, these same letters produce a rather different gloss: MY, I HATE WAR. Which, I suppose, is what, ultimately, our conference is about.

### **References**

- 1 <http://www3.sn.apc.org/africa/partial.html>
- 2 [http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art\\_id=905358474&rel=true](http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi?f=VS&art_id=905358474&rel=true)
- 3 <http://www.rez02.net/>
- 4 The sources for these estimates are given in my *Language Death* (2000), Chapter 4.
- 5 <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aaairaqwarcost.htm>

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