Back to the future

David Crystal *looks at the past, present and future of languages in the Centenary Threlford Memorial Lecture*

Anniversaries are stimuli for reflection. They make us acknowledge the achievements of the past, evaluate the progress of the present, and motivate our planning for the future. With a centennial, the task is harder, as century-old memories are inevitably fragmentary, and century-forward speculations, seriously unwise. But even fragments can be informative and speculations suggestive. So: 1910 – 2010 – 2110.

1910

What was the world of language like a century ago? Academically, the situation is well known. It was a world intellectually dominated by Indo-European philology and prescriptive language teaching. In 1910, Joseph Wright published his *Grammar of the Gothic Language*, one of dozens of such works from the period providing meticulous detail on the Indo-European languages of the past.

In historical lexicography, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, whose first fascicle had been published in 1884, had reached letter R. And the demand for usage guidance was widespread. The second edition of Fowler's *The King's English* was selling like hot cakes, with a third reprinting in only two years.

But times were changing. Modern linguistics was on the horizon. In 1910, Franz Boas published *Chinook: An Illustrative Sketch* and Edward Sapir published *Yana Texts*, showing the new interest in modern languages outside the Indo-European family. Ferdinand de Saussure presented his third course of lectures on general linguistics – part of a series, published in 1916, after his death, that laid the foundations of the modern subject.

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> *"It is almost impossible to teach English well unless another language is studied with it"*

Cracks were beginning to appear in the prescriptive tradition that had governed language-teaching in schools for 150 years. Teachers were uneasy, feeling the need to justify their language teaching methods, both in foreign language teaching and in the teaching of English. Reports being made to the Board of Education were increasingly critical of the time being wasted on what was perceived to be an outmoded and irrelevant English grammar.

The Regulations for Secondary Schools (1904-05) required the curriculum to offer at least a four-year course including "English Language and Literature" and "At least one Language other than English". In the minds of many people, the two were linked. The historical review in the Hadow Report[1] of 1923 includes the opinions of the two famous girl-school reformers, Miss Beale and Miss Buss. Here is Miss Buss, in 1868: "It is almost impossible to teach English well unless another language is studied with it, and that other language should be Latin or French or German."

In 1910, we are therefore talking about a generation – men and women alike – for which a modern-language awareness was part of the climate. It can be seen in journals such as *Punch*, where the articles, headings and cartoon captions assume a (sometimes shaky) knowledge of French and Latin. It is that sense of foreign languages being taken for granted, as a routine feature of educated life, that is the main point of contrast between 1910 and today. It is the restoration of this language awareness that should be our main goal. How is to be achieved? Perhaps the internet can help.

2010

The internet has already played a major role in fostering language presence. It offers a home to all languages – as soon as their communities have an electricity supply and a functioning computer technology. It is no longer possible to ignore languages on the internet; we only have to click on the flag. Its increasingly multilingual character has been the most notable change since its beginnings as a totally English medium.

Internet statistics must be treated cautiously, as much depends on what exactly is being counted (user profiles, user activity, websites, web pages, host servers[2]). Most

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CELEBRATIONS
*Children in UK schools mark
the European Day of
Languages in September*

estimates of internet language presence are based on counting web pages, but there are several difficulties. Search engines vary enormously and can yield very different results. A recent search for *laboratoire* using Google resulted in 156 million hits, whereas on Alta Vista the total was 56 million. Such totals are, in any case, approximate because they conflate pages from different times, rely on sources of data from different times, and contain an unknown number of duplicated pages.

It is necessary to bear these cautions in mind when looking at statements about the way languages are used on the internet. A typical illustration is the chart of the top ten internet languages at the beginning of 2010 (right), which measures usage in terms of the number of users. English continues to hold the leading position, but is likely to be soon replaced by Chinese, a language that has been increasing its internet presence more than four times more quickly than English during the first decade of the millennium.

The demand for diversity is certainly there. All else being equal, people like to read, write, listen and speak on the internet in their first language. As early as 2001, surveys, such as those provided by the Interactive Data Corporation, were reporting significant internet preferences for own-language use: 62 percent in France, 79 percent in Germany, 84 percent in Japan, 85 percent in China. These figures remain robust because they reflect preferences not abilities. Customers were said to be four times more likely to buy if approached in their own language. And the economic argument for internet multilingualism was repeatedly made in subsequent years.

However, the critical phrase is "all else being equal". When we examine the internet to establish the range and quality of content, we find huge disparities across languages. Languages are patently not equal. The internet is dominated by a small number of languages – the top ten occupy more than 80 percent of internet space.

Nobody has yet worked out how many languages have a presence on the internet or how much content is associated with them. But it is clear that the amount of data is often quite small and specialised, with little more than a symbolic role. The internet will one day represent the distribution of language presence in the world, but it is currently a long way from that ideal. For a multilingual internet to grow, there has to be policy agreement and technological implementation, and such things take time to put in place.

At a policy level, there have been several statements and resolutions affirming the desirability of a multilingual internet.[3] The first major step was in 2003, during the 32nd session of UNESCO's General Conference. That is the meeting where UNESCO adopted the convention on the preservation of the world's intangible heritage (including endangered languages). At the same meeting it also made a set of recommendations concerning the promotion and use of multilingualism and access to cyberspace.

However, it took some time before cyberpolicy began to be translated into cyber-reality. A critical step was the enabling of non-Latin writing systems to be used in domain names. As early as 2003, a mechanism was defined for handling names containing non-ASCII characters: Internationalizing Domain Names in Applications. Tests began on implementing the system, but it took five years

Top 10 internet languages 2010

Languages	% of internet users	Internet users (in millions)	% Internet penetration	% Internet language growth (2000-9)
English	27.5	496	39.4	252
Chinese	22.6	408	29.7	1,162
Spanish	7.8	140	34.0	669
Japanese	5.3	96	75.5	104
Portuguese	4.3	78	31.4	924
German	4.0	72	75.0	161
Arabic	3.3	60	17.5	2,298
French	3.2	57	16.9	375
Russian	2.5	45	32.3	1,360
Korean	2.1	37	52.7	97
Others	17.4	314	13.3	516
World total	100	1,802	26.6	399

before it was finally approved, and it was only in 2009 that the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) – the organisation that, since 1998, has coordinated the internet's naming system – announced the creation of country-code top-level domains. Several countries immediately applied, with Arabic, Russian and Chinese implementations introduced in mid-2010.

Until quite recently there were real problems in using the characters of the keyboard to cope with the orthographic diversity of the world's languages. Because the English alphabet was the standard, only a few non-English accents and diacritics could be handled. If a foreign word had some strange-looking accent marks, the internet software would simply ignore them and assume they weren't important.

The Unicode Consortium was formed in 1991 with the aim of providing a universal

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character encoding platform. The first version was released in June 1993, and by October 2009 it had reached version 5.2, which supports 90 scripts and 107,156 linguistic symbols, along with a range of other graphs, such as punctuation marks and numerals.

The internet is increasing virtual language awareness, but how is this awareness to be focused in non-virtual reality? What can be done to keep linguistic diversity, multilingualism, language learning and related matters in the public eye? This, to my mind, is the main challenge for the future.

2110

I did actually think that the future had begun back in 2008, which was designated by UNESCO as the International Year for Languages. But two years on, how many people remember that? The year has gone the same way as all other years. The situation is complicated by the fact that for each chronological year there is not one but several UN years. In 2008, our Languages Year was in competition with the International

Year of Sanitation, the Reef, Planet Earth, and the Potato.

It was competition. Human beings are able to take in only so much information, and are willing and able to devote attention, time and money to only a tiny number of the laudable projects that are placed before them. So why should they pay attention to language, especially when there is a much more obvious and pressing cause to attend to: planet Earth? It is this theme that grabbed most media attention in 2008.

How are we to get people to pay attention to language? What initiatives would make a permanent impact on the consciousness of the human race as a whole, so that it would never forget the important role languages play in its wellbeing? This is the critical aim. Ultimately, most things linguists do are dependent on public approval. Somebody has to pay for documentation, revitalisation, translation, maintaining diversity: organisations or individuals (philanthropists, policy-makers, political purse-holders) who need to be persuaded that their investment is worthwhile.

But public approval presupposes public attention. So how are we to gain it? I note four main ways, initially introduced in relation to endangered languages at a UNESCO conference,[4] then generalised to all languages in relation to the International Year.[5] Each initiative could make a significant difference in fostering a fresh language awareness.

1 Celebratory days
Religions have festivals, countries have national days, families have days for mothers,

'PUNCH' CAPTION
English lady (coming to the rescue of her countryman who has entered a Paris shop on the strength of the notice "English spoken here" but can get nothing out of the Attendant. "QUI DONC PARLE ANGLAIS?" Attendant. "MAIS, MADAME, LES ACHETEUSES ANGLAISES."
Punch cartoon, 2 March 1910
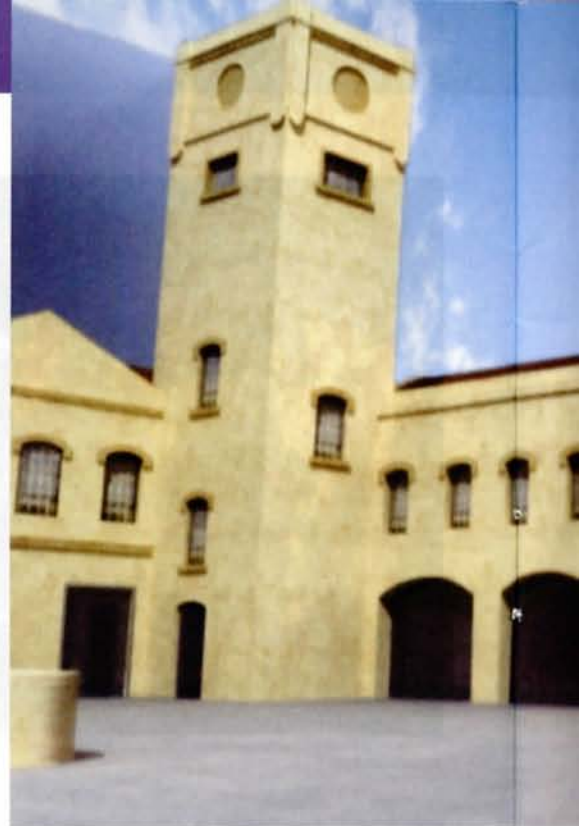
fathers and more. There is Halloween, Shakespeare's Birthday, Bastille Day. Linguists have done the same. There is World Languages Day and International Mother Language Day. But establishing a day is not enough. We have to ask: how do we celebrate it? And how do others celebrate their days? With parades, displays, dressing up, badges, cards, presents. This is something which, at an international level, linguists do not do.

I am not suggesting CIOL meetings should take place in fancy dress. But there are other ways. Take cards. I would love to send a card to friends for World Languages Day, or send an e-card – but where are they? Take displays. Google, for example, varies its logo design in honour of special days. Why not a display for the Language Days? Google could not exist without language.

2 Locations to visit
If you are interested in science, you can visit a science museum. Plants and animals, a natural history museum. Painting, an art gallery. But for languages there is nothing, in country after country, other than the occasional local institute devoted to a single language (such as Portuguese in São Paulo), and even that is unusual. The first such physical location devoted to languages in general will be the Casa de les Llengües (House of Languages) in Barcelona. It needs to be followed by others. And already-existing places need to mount languages exhibitions.

In Britain, during the late 1990s, there was a plan to set up a World of Language on the South Bank; then the government had a better idea, called the Millennium Dome, all

FULL HOUSE
The world's first museum of languages, Linguamón – Casa de les Llengües, in Barcelona, is due to open in 2013

even if we added the annual awards of the Institute (which I hope will happen), we wouldn't move languages very far up the list.

The value of an award is not its monetary value, which can be quite low or non-existent. Rather, it is the professional recognition it provides to an individual or institution, the motivation for action to that person's or institution's peers, and the publicity for the subject that the winner professes.

Prizes, in other words, keep a topic in front of the public's attention, year after year. And not just once a year, but every time the recipient is mentioned. Look at the way journalists deal with them. Write-ups do not say "director Ang Lee" but "Oscar-winning director Ang Lee". The attribution is significant: it transforms a name from someone we *might not* know about (if we are not specialists) into someone that we *should* know about. And it identifies areas of knowledge that we feel we should know about. We need to get language in general, and multilingualism in particular, into that position.

In my ideal future linguistic world, all four of these initiatives would be implemented: days, locations, artworks and awards. Progress is slowly being made, but we have a long way to go before we obtain the kind of public presence that is needed. Maybe by 2110. In the meantime, organisations such as the CIOL need to point the way forward, and with a century of experience already behind it, I have no doubt that it will continue to do so.

funding ceased, and the project collapsed. Ten years on, the idea was resuscitated with an eye on the 2012 Olympics; but once the costs of that event began to spiral out of control, the initiative went off the radar. I live in hope that, one day, Britain will have its own House of Languages. Meanwhile, the Catalan initiative progresses: the building in which it will be housed was formally allocated in 2009 and should be open to the public in a year.

3 Artworks

How do we remember someone or some event? We build a monument or statue (Nelson's Column), write a play (Shakespeare's *Henry V*) or piece of music (Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*), paint a picture (Picasso's *Guernica*), make a film (Spielberg's *Amistad*)… I could go through all the arts and point to the commemorate artworks that keep topics in the forefront of our minds.

I presented this argument at a UNESCO conference,[6] and the final summary document did include a reference to the importance of the arts. But the point, though recognised in theory, remains neglected in practice. For where are the artworks devoted to language and to languages?

I am not, of course, talking about the works that have been composed or constructed to celebrate an individual language. I can think of several poems and folk-songs that celebrate Welsh, for example, and there are similar compositions in many other languages. I am talking about commemorations of language in general, languages, language diversity, multilingualism. Why are major artworks on these themes not commissioned?

> *I would love to send a card to friends for World Languages Day, or send an e-card, but where are they?*

4 Awards

How does literature become front-page news? Or painting, film, economics, peace, physiology, physics, chemistry? You will perceive, from my examples, that I am thinking about prizes, awards and medals – most famously, the Nobel prizes. There is the huge Templeton prize for progress in religion. Several countries do their own thing. The UK has its Turner Prize for contemporary art. France has its Prix Goncourt. In the US, there are no less than 21 categories of Pulitzer Prize.

If you make a list of annual or biennial prizes, medals and awards on topics of international concern you will find more than 1,000. When I made such a table, derived from Wikipedia, guess which domain was at the bottom. Although there are more than 300 listed prizes for literature, 30 for journalism, 13 for beauty and 8 for advertising, the listed awards for languages number just one. This single reference is to the Linguapax Award for outstanding work in the field of language diversity and multilingual education.

Why aren't there more? Well, of course, there are more, as the CIOL well knows; but

Notes

1 Hadow Report: Differentiation of the curriculum for boys and girls respectively in secondary schools, 1923, HM Stationery Office, London
2 Gerrand, P, "Estimating Linguistic Diversity on the Internet: A Taxonomy to Avoid Pitfalls and Paradoxes" in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), article 8
3 Crystal, D, *Internet Linguistics*, 2011, Routledge, Abingdon
4 Crystal, D, "Crossing the Great Divide: Language Endangerment and Public Awareness", 2003, keynote speech to the International Expert Meeting on Endangered Languages, UNESCO, Paris
5 Crystal, D, "What Do we Do with an International Year of Languages?", 2007, Paper given to the Unescocat forum, Barcelona, European Languages Day, 26 September
6 *Op. cit* 2003