

DOCUMENTI

Foundation for Endangered Languages

The FEL manifesto

1. The Present Situation

At this point in human history, most human languages are spoken by very few people, but that majority of languages is about to vanish.

The most authoritative source on the languages of the world, the Ethnologue, lists nearly 7,000 living languages. Population figures for just over 6,000 show that:

- 52% of languages are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people
- 28% are spoken by fewer than 1,000
- 83% are spoken only in single countries, and so are particularly exposed to the policies of a single government

At the other end of the scale, 10 major languages, each spoken by over 109 million people, are the mother tongues of almost half of the world's population.

More important than this snapshot of proportions and populations is the outlook for survival of the languages that are spoken. Data about this is scarce, because of the sheer variety of the human condition: a small community, isolated or bilingual, may continue to speak a unique language for centuries, while elsewhere a populous language may for social or political reasons die out in little more than a generation. The period in which records have been kept is too short to clearly document trends: for example the Ethnologue has been issued only since 1951. However, it is difficult to imagine many communities sustaining everyday use of a language for even a generation with fewer than 100 speakers: yet at least 10% of the world's living languages are now in this position.

Some of the forces which threaten languages are clear: the impacts of urbanization, Westernization and global communications grow daily, all diminishing the self-sufficiency and self-confidence of small and traditional communities. Discriminatory policies and population movements also take their toll of languages.

Today, the preponderance of tiny language communities means that the majority of the world's languages are vulnerable to decline and extinction.

2. The Likely Prospect

There is agreement among linguists that over half of the world's languages are not being passed on to the next generation. We are living at the point in human history where, within two generations, most languages in the world will die out.

This mass extinction of languages may not appear to be obviously tragic. Some people believe that a reduction in the number of languages will increase communication, and help to build nations, even global solidarity. On the other hand, we know that human life across the planet depends on our ability to develop cultures enabling survival in a

variety of environments. These cultures have been transmitted by languages, through oral traditions and, more recently, through writing. So when language transmission breaks down there is always a large loss of inherited knowledge. Once that knowledge is lost – whether its value is recognized or not – a community and the whole of humanity is poorer. Along with it may go a large part of the pride and identity of the community of former speakers.

And there is another kind of loss, of a different type of knowledge. As each language dies, many sciences – linguistics, anthropology, prehistory and psychology – lose one more precious source of data, one more of the diverse and unique ways that the human mind can express itself through a language's structure, vocabulary and idiom.

The result of the impending loss of most of the world's linguistic diversity cannot be predicted. But language loss is generally irreversible and has no known positive outcomes. Speakers of endangered languages may rightfully resist the extinction of their linguistic identities and their traditions. And we, as concerned people, or as scientists, applaud and support them in their attempt to preserve the diversity that is one of humanity's greatest treasures.

3. The Need for an Organization

While we cannot stop the global forces which cause language decline and loss, we *can* work to combat their effects, to strengthen languages against them, and to highlight all that is lost when a language vanishes.

We can work to lessen the damage:

- by recording and documenting languages which are in terminal decline
- by promoting literacy and language maintenance programmes to increase language proficiency and morale within endangered language communities
- by encouraging support for language and cultural maintenance through use of media and communication technologies
- by emphasizing the value and benefits of language diversity

To pursue these aims, there is a need for an autonomous international organization which is not constrained or influenced by matters of race, politics, gender or religion. This organization will recognize that language issues are inseparable from the principles of self-determination, and group and individual rights. It will pay due regard to economic, social, cultural, community and humanitarian considerations. Although it may work with any international, regional or local authority, it will always retain its independence. Membership will be open to all.

4. Aims and Objectives

The Foundation for Endangered Languages exists to support, enable and assist the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages. In order to do this, it aims:

1. to raise awareness of endangered languages, both inside and outside the communities where they are spoken, through all channels and media
2. to support the use of endangered languages in all contexts: at home, in education, in the media, and in social, cultural and economic life

3. to monitor linguistic policies and practices, and to seek to influence the appropriate authorities where necessary
4. to support the documentation of endangered languages, by offering financial assistance, training, or facilities for the publication of results
5. to collect and make available information for use in the preservation of endangered languages
6. to disseminate information on all of the above activities as widely as possible.