

# Editorial

Languages have not always been perceived as a rich heritage – one that needs protecting and safeguarding. For a long time, policies dictating their use within national borders were approached from religious or social angles. Internationally, the recognition of cultural identities, followed by the consideration of cultural rights, and finally the emergence of the concept of living or intangible heritage, enabled the inclusion of languages within the concept of cultural heritage. Today, the creation of a new type of museum is envisaged.

These days, languages are considered a fundamental part of cultural diversity – essential for the latter's maintenance and functioning. But despite facing threats as great as those confronting other tangible cultural property, the question remains as to whether languages – and the need to preserve them – benefit from the same level of attention. Besides the legal and political responses to this question, an approach to heritage that is as ethical as it is technical can help considerably to promote languages and their diversity as instruments of social integration, development and peace.

Our objective in this issue is not to deal with the sociolinguistic and sociopolitical aspects of languages and linguistic diversity, since these have previously been addressed in UNESCO publications, in particular those specializing in the field of social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Rather, this issue will commemorate 2008 as the International Year of Languages by examining the question from the point of view of culture and heritage: as an expression of meetings and dialogue with others. In the words of Édouard Glissant: 'I speak to you in your language, and it is in mine that I understand you.'<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this issue deals with the overlying ethical and legal principles that define and account for the importance of languages within the framework of UNESCO's mission. As shown by Mauro Rosi's article 'UNESCO and Languages: A Commitment to Culture and Development', the organization has worked for more than sixty years – today more than ever – to promote languages in all their variety, as well as the practice of specific examples. The preservation of linguistic diversity, notably by the safeguarding of endangered languages, is essential for maintaining the identity of groups and individuals, just as the promotion of multilingualism is a prerequisite for forging mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. UNESCO has committed itself to this course of

action, working within a demanding context to develop international normative tools centred mostly on rights. Janet Blake elaborates upon this theme in her article ‘The International Legal Framework for the Safeguarding and Promotion of Languages’.

Of course, these legal instruments respond to the needs of linguistic communities, but they must also demonstrate their efficiency, both at national and international levels. For their part, governments are requested to formulate linguistic policies that allow each community to use its first or mother language – this being what Wilhelm von Humboldt refers to as ‘the spirit of the people; the soul of the nation in all that makes them specific’. This is illustrated here by articles on African languages, the Guaraní language and the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages.

Taking stock of ten years of protection and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity on the European continent, Alexey Kozhemyakov demonstrates that, with 250 spoken languages, greater Europe constitutes the best laboratory for preserving the identity of the continent’s different linguistic groups and promoting their mutual understanding. In the article ‘Languages and Cultural Identities in Africa’, Mesmin Tchindjang, Athanase Bopda and Louise A. Ngamgne explain how local languages, despite their diversity, have created and consolidated an African identity. They also demonstrate how these languages, when used to promote literacy, act as a driver for sustainable development. African languages nourished the ground in which oral tradition took root, largely thanks to connections established by the oral storytelling tradition of griot poets and musicians. This is part of a historical continuity that neither the slave trade nor colonization was able to destroy. As Sara Delicia Villagra-Batoux shows, whether in the heart of Africa or on the banks of the Rio Paraná, local language, is what anchors the identity of a population while promoting the social integration of the majority. It is in following this principle that the Paraguayan state has made Guaraní, an indigenous language of the American continent, one of the country’s official languages.

The second part of this issue focuses on the preservation of linguistic diversity, which gives meaning to the world’s plurality and to the dialogue that keeps it alive. This is accomplished, first, by creating a place for each language – as the article of Akira Yamamoto, Matthias Brezinger and Maria E. Villalón invites us to do. Languages hide a treasure – at the end of the rainbow lies the pot of gold of human genius. But if a language is no longer spoken, it dies. What leads one to abandon the language of one’s ancestors and prefer a dominant language? What does such a loss imply for the local population and for humanity? For the authors, if using a vehicular language is necessary for communicating in the heart of the global village that the world has become today,

then the use of the vernacular is essential for 'being' not only oneself, but also a member of a community. Lack of will to transmit language, a personal but highly social attribute, often leads to feelings of rootlessness within a country. There can be no history without transmission from one generation to the next. The continuing existence or not of a language depends upon this 'passing of the baton'. Juana Pabla Pérez Tejedor develops this theme in her article 'The Role of the Palenge Language in the Transmission of Afro-Palenuero Cultural Heritage'. It is by reclaiming their mother language that the Palenqueros were able to formulate pertinent strategies for safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage. These included social solidarity practices, such as *kuagros* (institutions grouping together members of the same sex) or the funerary rituals of the *Lumbalú*. Languages evolve, nourished as much by tradition as by modernity. This is why they constitute a living heritage, on condition that they retain the link with their roots.

Over the last few years, several new initiatives have seen the light of day, such as the creation of museums dedicated to language and languages. These museums complement normative actions and fieldwork, raising awareness among both young people and adults of the survival of a good part of the (at least) 6,500 languages currently spoken in the world. Far from pinning languages down like butterflies in enclosed dusty glass cases – on the contrary, the aim of these new museums is to demonstrate the present and future vitality of languages, through the use of panoramic presentations animated by multiple forms of audiovisual interaction. In this way the 'Museum of Language' project was born in the 1990s, as David Crystal nostalgically recalls. Regretfully, the project was ultimately abandoned. However, Barcelona has planned the opening of its 'House of Languages' (Linguamón) for 2010.

Finally, with this new issue of *MUSEUM International*, we would like to emphasize that *languages matter!*

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## | NOTES

1. E. J. Ruiz Vieytez, 'The Protection of Linguistic Minorities: A Historical Approach', *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 3:1 (2001), Paris: UNESCO, pp. 5–14.

2. É. Glissant, 'Poétique de la relation', in *Poétique III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 122.