

CLIPP

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Endangered languages in the view of the Comité
International Permanent des Linguistes

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Endangered languages in the view of the Comité International Permanent des Linguistes

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1. CIPL's mandate

The Comité International Permanent des Linguistes, or 'CIPL' for short, is the worldwide association of linguists. Since the death of Stephan Wurm last year, its president has been Paolo Ramat, University of Pavia. As was mentioned in the presentation by Dr. Bouchenaki, CIPL has worked in close cooperation with UNESCO in all matters concerning language and culture, especially documentation and maintenance of endangered languages.

2. Past activities

In past years, CIPL gave modest financial support to 10 projects devoted to the documentation of endangered languages. From this experience, we can draw the following generalizations:

- CIPL focuses on linguistic issues proper, because that is where its competence lies. It keeps an eye on it that every language in the world has an equal chance of being documented and that linguists all over the world communicate and cooperate in this area.
- Inside the professional field of linguistics, the prestige of fieldwork, documentation and salvage work has to be raised. Therefore, CIPL has been putting the issue of endangered languages on the agenda of each of the International Congresses of Linguists since 1992.

3. Suggestions

- Where endangered languages are concerned, work on **documentation** and on **maintenance** depend on each other. On the one hand, a good documentation presupposes active engagement of the speech community and, thus, language maintenance. On the other hand, language preservation presupposes a good documentation, because otherwise the endangered language will not be able to maintain itself against a literate dominant language. Therefore preference is given to projects which combine documentation and maintenance.
- Minority and underprivileged groups typically do not solve their problems by themselves, but rely on outside help. Outside helpers, however, tend to have their own interests. Please let's not act as if linguists were selfless idealists. Successful projects are those that start by explicit recognition of the interests of the parties involved and then organize a **cooperation of mutual benefit**. The community is being served in its concern about maintenance of its value system and of a functioning social community; and expert linguists are served with data and insights on diverse languages.

- The *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* involves a plan of action whose item 2 vindicates “encouraging linguistic diversity at all levels of education, wherever possible, and fostering the learning of several languages from the youngest age”. This is most important. One cannot maintain linguistic diversity in a world of monolingual speech communities. **Monolingualism is the most important enemy to cultural diversity.** Monolinguals are indifferent and even hostile to cultural and linguistic diversity because they do not profit from it and feel threatened by it. Conversely, they are a threat to international understanding. Therefore, all of us have to promote multilingualism.
- The role of multilingualism in the balance between language maintenance and language shift must be considered more carefully. One cannot close one’s eyes against the fact that just as polygamy of the husband is a potential threat to any one of his wives, so multilingualism of a speech community is a potential threat to maintenance of its own language, insofar as it is a presupposition of language shift. Multilingualism is an actual threat to a minority language all of whose speakers also speak the dominant language.
- The decisive political argument in favor of bilingual education is not “that acquiring bilingual capability need in no way diminish competence in the official language” (*Language Vitality and Endangerment*, p. 8); the political point is that there is abundant empirical proof that alphabetisation in the native language enhances rather than diminishes competence in the dominant language.
- There has been sufficient rhetoric on languages as cultural heritage and on the spiritual values enshrined in them, but too few examples have come forth that would be palpable enough to convince a non-linguist of the point. It is not sufficient to mention such examples (true to the academic principle of *sapienti sat*); they have to be explained in publicly intelligible terms. It would be naïve to assume that any professional linguist could produce such examples randomly if he were asked to. Many of the examples that are actually mentioned, like riddles, puzzles, proverbs and so on, are actually translatable without loss of information, so that they prove nothing on the necessity of preserving the language. We need examples of peculiar cognitive categorizations and communicative operations that provide an eye-opening experience and that could not be implemented in English.
- Since language maintenance and revitalization has been on the agenda both of linguistics and of speech communities, several relevant projects have been executed. There should be an archive of reports on successful projects that state
 - what the endangerment situation was at the start of the project,
 - what was done to maintain or revitalize the language,
 - what kind of stable situation has been reached after conclusion of the project.
 Such reports would encourage other speech communities to engage on such a project and would help them avoid mistakes.

In conclusion: CIPL continues to offer its professional expertise and its worldwide contacts in promoting our common concern and in selecting, organizing and evaluating relevant projects.