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On the value of a language

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We live in an age where the extinction of languages has become a topic of discussion in many different circles. Opinions on whether the process should be stopped or considered profitable differ widely even in the field of linguistics, let alone in the public domain. A rational attitude presupposes the recognition that a language may constitute a value for some and that value judgements are controlled by more or less outspoken and divergent interests. In the case of a language, interest is taken in its maintenance (or suppression) at all the levels from the individual via the speech community and the scientific community up to mankind. These interests have to be made explicit before the value of a language can be assessed. Ultimately, such an evaluation must even be confronted with the costs that arise in the maintenance of a minority language or in the revitalization of a dying language.

Introduction

It is only since about the end of the 1980s that linguists have become aware of the rapid extinction of the languages of the world and have alerted the general public about it. Since then, the topic has been coming up repeatedly in the mass media. The general public takes it for granted that caring for the multifarious nature of languages on the globe is the affair of linguists. The interest of a professional group in conserving their subject matter is understandable and does not constitute any argument to the effect that the world has an interest in conserving it. Quite the contrary, whenever the topic comes up for discussion in the newspapers, there are a number of correspondents who express their dissatisfaction with the confusion of languages. The tenor of such statements can mostly be resumed in the question 'why can't they just speak English?' For many people (e.g. de Swaan[1]), the coexistence of thousands of languages on the globe simply constitutes a communication problem. In this perspective, far from being a value, a language – and above all another person's language – is an obstacle that should be removed. Needless to say, the multiplicity of languages is in the way of globalization, and there are consequently much more powerful forces at

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work in the suppression of minority languages than those provincial manifestations of individuals who are unable to appreciate what is different from themselves (as a matter of fact, 'the intention of the elimination of linguistic diversity is not to improve ways of communication, but to annihilate the treasure of cultural experiences of people that has sedimented in their languages'[3]).

In this situation, linguists have been remarkably successful in the past 20 years in raising funds for projects that aim to document and describe languages before they die out and to help communities in maintaining or revitalizing their traditional language against an oppressive environment. Quite a few big foundations have dedicated considerable sums to the preservation of endangered languages. The UNESCO has set up an 'Intangible Heritage Section' that deals with the preservation of immaterial goods of mankind, and which importantly contains languages. One therefore might think that the value of languages is sufficiently recognized by now and, thus, no longer an issue.

However, both documenting a language for posterity and revitalizing a language in its speech community costs considerable amounts of money. Funds can be obtained from agencies only against the competition of divergent interests and in the face of opposing forces. In the long run, it will not suffice for linguists to simply point to a small language that is threatened by extinction in order to appeal to the charity of funding institutions. We must therefore enter into a rational discussion about the value of a language that goes beyond romantic yearning for the primitive and exotic[1,2].

The notion of value

A value is the result of an act of evaluation: a person evaluates an object in assigning it a position on a certain evaluation parameter. The notion of value is relative in many ways. Three of these are definitory:

1. For a thing to have a value is not an either-or issue, but a matter of degree and of hierarchical position relative to other things.
2. A thing has different values along different parameters; and these again are in a hierarchy or may conflict with each other.
3. The value of a thing depends on the evaluation of a person or group, which means it has so much value for that person or group.

Apart from the above essential aspects of relativity, a value is relative in other respects, too. Since a value is the product of an evaluation, it is contingent upon the circumstances of the particular evaluation act:

- The value of a thing correlates, ceteris paribus, inversely with the number of exemplars of the same kind that one already possesses.
- The same thing is valued higher if it is lost than if it is gained.

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The second finding again confirms the partly irrational character of values. We move on a terrain where rational argument reaches its limits (cf. Betsch[4]).

Needless to say, the admitted subjectivity of values does not license anybody's slighting other people's values. Assume that my neighbour considers something a value, but I do not. Then both human empathy and the Kantian categorical imperative induce me to respect my neighbour's evaluation. In short, other peoples' values are values; any act that affects negatively something valorized by somebody else is an aggressive act.

Evaluation of languages

Superiority and inferiority of languages

The basic unreflected attitude towards the languages that a person encounters is naïve language chauvinism. This simply means: my own language is the only one that really deserves the name, everything else is just gibberish. Naïve language chauvinism has been with us since the Greeks called all Non-Greeks *bárbaroi* on the basis of the noises they made when trying to speak. In the Spanish speaking world, it is customary to reserve the term *lengua* for Spanish and to call all other languages that may be spoken in the country *idiomas* or even *dialectos*. Not seldom has language chauvinism been supported by pseudoscientific arguments. For instance, members of the *Académie Française* like François Charpentier[5] and public writers like Antoine de Rivarol[6] have proven repeatedly that French is the best language in the world (remember Rivarol's (1783[1964], p. 90) famous slogan 'Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français').

Up to the 20th century, the evaluation of languages was at about that level of theoretical refinement. Typologists of the 19th century (e.g. Steinthal and Misteli[7]) defined general standards for a well-formed language that happened to coincide with the structure of Indo-European (especially ancient Indo-European) languages, applied these in the assessment of diverse languages of the world and found out that practically all languages except the Indo-European ones were deficient.

In the 20th century, argumentation became more sophisticated. It is now generally presupposed that there are no rational grounds for assigning languages different values. However, so the argument goes, since there are more than enough languages in the world and any language is as good as any other, no harm is done if a couple of them disappear. Whether the language that becomes extinct is called Itzá Maya or Spanish makes no difference in principle. Given certain outward circumstances that we cannot control, it just so happens that the victim is Itzá Maya rather than Spanish. This cynical attitude derives directly from the hegemonic aspirations alluded to in the introduction.

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The essential equality of languages

Every single language is an example of human language, i.e. something that distinguishes human beings from animals. Language serves two equal highest goals, communication and cognition. At this level of abstraction, we may ask what the value of human language as such is. The answer will depend on two conditions, the role of communication and cognition in the *conditio humana* and the indispensability of language in the pursuance of these goals. As for the first condition, it is generally assumed that both communication – communion and exchange with fellow human beings with respect to how we feel and think – and cognition – understanding the world surrounding us – are constitutive of the *conditio humana*. This means that life has the more human dignity to the extent that communication and cognition are furthered. As for the second condition, other activities, such as dancing, playing and contemplating may partly serve the same goals, but none does it as comprehensively and perfectly as language. The answer to the question concerning the value of language for mankind and, consequently, for every human being is thus simple: language is constitutive of humanity, without it, we would be less human. The concrete impact of this statement can be appreciated if one thinks of 'wild children' like the German Kaspar Hauser or the US American Genie, or again of people who lose their speech by a stroke.

Human language only exists in the form of individual historical languages. Such a language, in principle, inherits the values assigned to human language. However, languages are variant means in communication and cognition. An individual may switch between different languages, and a whole community may shift from one language to another. Consequently the question of whether all languages have the same value obviously depends on whether they are equal in their functionality. This question is beset with ideological and objective problems. The former have to do with occidental arrogance, racism and ignorance among the general public. The latter have to do with the possibilities and past achievements of linguistic science as confronted with the complexity of natural languages. The ideological problems are not to be taken lightly. The scientist can measure certain properties of different languages, compare them and ascertain that a certain language performs higher on a certain parameter than another language; for instance, it may have a more complex case system or be used in more different media of communication. However, he selects such parameters of comparison because he thinks they are relevant for a certain purpose, and this decision may ultimately be based on ideological convictions.

Turning now to ways in which the issue of the equality of all languages may be approached objectively, the question is what criteria can be used to determine how a language performs in furthering communication and cognition. I cannot

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treat this question systematically here and must abide by giving some illustrative examples.[26] One approach is to determine how much a society actually uses this language for these purposes. Languages differ enormously in this respect. For instance, most languages are not used to do science in the occidental understanding of this notion, simply because they are not written. Most languages are not used in formal education, for the same reason. Some of these languages are not used in written communication because their speech community is principally not engaged in such activities. For other languages, the reason is that their speech community employs another language for such purposes. In any case, if the entire field of communication and cognition is split up into pragmatic domains (as done, for instance, in the ethnography of communication; cf. Ref. 8), then it is quite clear that some languages are used in more domains than others. For instance, the speech community of the Mayas of Yucatan (Mexico) uses Spanish in everything having to do with law and uses Maya for this purpose only on those rare occasions when Spanish juridical texts are translated into Maya.

The use of a language in a certain pragmatic domain naturally contributes to the extension of those parts of its system that immediately serve the specific function. For instance, the Maya language is much poorer in juridical vocabulary and phraseology than the Spanish language. Therefore, the uses for which a language is employed concern the nature of the language as a repository of ideas. However, languages tend to be flexible and extendable in this respect. If a society decides to use a certain language in a new pragmatic domain, then the relevant resources of the language will quickly be expanded. Such enrichment will mainly concern the vocabulary and the phraseology and will not affect very much the linguistic system, namely the sound system, the morphology and the syntax with their categories and rules. If one takes the latter to be characteristic of a language and constitutive of its individuality, then the basic nature of a language may be touched very little by the uses to which it is put.

This leads us to an alternative approach to the question of whether all languages are equal, which consists of analysing their systems and determining the kinds of conceptual distinctions and operations they enable their speakers to make. The issue here is whether properties of a language system could possibly be relevant to its evaluation. We will return later to the question of the cognitive richness of languages. Here we will approach it at an abstract and general level. Evaluative judgements on languages by Jane Doe and by 19th century typologists have one thing in common: languages that are disqualified are primitive and highly valued languages are civilized. It is clear that for both groups of evaluators, prejudices concerning the state of civilization of occidental versus exotic peoples prevailed over an objective appraisal of the language systems. Supposing we can free ourselves from such prejudices, the question is: do languages actually differ on a scale from primitivity to elaboration?

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Suppose we reduce this criterion to the degree of complexity of the language system. We then face a methodological problem. General linguistics is prepared to compare the degree of complexity of selected subsystems of the language system. For instance, there is no doubt that Spanish has a simpler phonological system than English and a simpler morphological system than Latin. However, what has proved impossible up to now is to assess the overall complexity of a language by counting up complexities of its subsystems. The most we can say, is that if a language is simple in each of its subsystems, then it is really simple.

There are actually languages that are simple by this criterion, namely pidgin languages. We may feel justified in considering them primitive because their own speakers do not valorize them either. In the case of pidgin languages, lack of formal complexity coincides with extreme limitation in terms of the range of pragmatic domains in which the language is employed. Pidgin languages are really not full-fledged languages. The same holds, incidentally, for moribund languages, that is languages that are no longer used on a daily basis. This objective fact was the essential reason why the Volkswagen Foundation, in setting up its program 'Dokumentation bedrohter Sprachen' (2000ff), decided not to support the documentation of moribund languages.

As soon as we keep pidgin and moribund languages out and focus on languages that fulfil the whole range of pragmatic functions required in their speech community, then we have to state that every language in the world has what has been called effability, i.e. the capacity of expressing everything that one may want to express.

Suppose that our methodology would suffice to assess the overall complexity of linguistic systems and we would find that some languages are actually simpler than others. On the basis of present linguistic intuitions, we may expect that Indonesian will come out as one of the simplest languages in the world, while English has good chances to be near the pole of extreme complexity. We may then trace back and question the validity of the criterion we worked with in the first place. Why would complexity be a virtue and simplicity be a defect? After all, a simpler language is much easier to learn for foreigners than a more complex one. So since every language including Indonesian has effability, practical considerations would lead us to value Indonesian more highly than English.

The upshot of this discussion is that no rational criteria are known that would allow us to set up a general hierarchy of languages in terms of their value. All we can do is ask for the values of a language at some lower level of differentiation. We will distinguish between two perspectives:

- What are the possible values of a language along different evaluation parameters?

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- What are the possible values of a language at different levels of interest, i.e. from the individual up to the global level?

These questions will be taken up in the following two main sections.

Parameters of evaluation of a language

The practical value of a language

Many people hold the view that one language is just as good as any other. If a language is lost, then this does not entail that the speech community ceases to speak; they just use a different language. So no harm is done to anybody. This is the instrumental view of language, where a language is like a tool for a given aim and any tool that serves that aim is as good as any other. We will start by taking this perspective here in order to see how far it carries us.

One of the chief properties of a language that lends it practical value is its prestige (the prestige that a language enjoys in some social environment comes under the rubric of language attitudes, which is a canonical object of sociolinguistics). Much of the prestige of a language is derived from other values. Already Libanius (Or. 1, 214), a Greek sophist and rhetorician of the 4th century AD in Antioch, commented on the ousting of Greek by Latin and evinced a clear understanding of the fact that this is mainly due to 'power and wealth', as he says. The same goes for the role of French from the 17th up to the 20th century (see the contemporary testimonies quoted in Hagège, ch. VI[9] and Hagège,[10] pp. 97–108.). And the same is true of the role of English in our times. The prestige of this language does not derive from its own beauty or from the value of the culture that it transports, but exclusively from the power and wealth that it represents and promises.

There are, however, other factors that may contribute to the prestige of a language and that are less extrinsic. Most of the languages in the world are only used for oral communication. A language that is used in written communication has a higher prestige than one that is not. The above-mentioned deprecation of vernacular languages as *dialectos* in the Spanish-speaking world is essentially based on this criterion: if these idioms cannot even be written down, they don't have the status of a language.

The existence of a grammar and a dictionary of a language is another factor intimately associated with literacy. A language can serve for written communication only if users can rely on a grammar (including an orthography) and a dictionary. In the past decades, linguists have published more or less comprehensive descriptions of many hitherto unknown languages. However, in many cases these achievements remain inside the professional domain and are never taken advantage of by the speech community. Again, in the judgement of

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outsiders, an idiom that does not even have a grammar is not a real language. The weight of this judgement is greatly aggravated by the fact that 'grammar' means something different for the layman and for the specialist. The linguist distinguishes between what might be called grammar(1) as the systematicity that is intrinsic to every language, and grammar(2) that is the product of the linguistic description of grammar(1). Thus, for the linguist, every language in the world has a grammar in the essential sense – grammar(1). For the layman, however, a language does not have a grammar(1) unless it has a grammar(2). Given this premise, the conclusion that an idiom that does not have a grammar(2) is not a real language is fully justified. Therefore, one of the most important things that linguists concerned with the maintenance of a language can do is publish a grammar and a dictionary of it that members of the speech community can use and hold out to the general public.

The cultural value of a language

A language is a key to the culture of its speech community. This has been especially important in the case of extinct languages or of earlier stages of modern languages. Many people want to know about life in ancient times, and even more people want to know how their own ancestors lived. The way to learn about this is to study those ancient languages. This was the main driving force behind the prestige that the classical languages enjoyed in the humanistic education in Europe.

Ritual languages deserve to be singled out for their particular value. Religious practice is bound up with the use of appropriate language, and very often there is only one language admissible. In the Catholic Church, Latin was the only ritual language for many centuries, long after it ceased to be used in daily communication. The situation of Coptic in the Coptic Church, of Old Church Slavonic in the Orthodox Church, of Sumerian in Babylonian religious practice is similar. In several of these cases, the only reason a language survived was because it was indispensable in religious practice.

In our day, efforts of language maintenance generally lead to programmes of bilingual and bicultural education. The coordination is important. People understand that the purpose of saving an endangered language does not reduce to keeping a system of communication alive. The language codes, interprets and transports the culture. A person that has learnt to communicate in two languages can live in two cultures. Such people do not only experience a personal enrichment but are an important force in keeping peace in multiethnic societies – Camartin[12] is a passionate pleading for cultural diversity on the example of Romansh.

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The epistemic value of a language

As an object of intellectual curiosity, a language embodies a treasure of ideas and of solutions to problems of communication and cognition. Some grammatical categories are widespread, others are areally restricted, yet others are unique to one language (cf. Plank[24]) and, therefore an object of intellectual curiosity. Here are some examples of lexical and grammatical properties of languages that may seem instructive for a speaker of a European language. *Yup'ik* (an Eskimo language) has 14 words designating different kinds of shoes and boots.[11] Many languages make fine distinctions in their grammar depending on the empathy that the speaker feels with a referent. Japanese, for instance, has a plural suffix, but it only uses it for human nouns. Nouns for animals and inanimate things do not distinguish numbers. Again, the degree of control exerted by a subject of a clause is coded in many languages by its case marking or the verb inflection. The Georgian language (Caucasus) has the subject in the active case for verbs like 'cry', but in the inactive case for verbs like 'die'.

Some languages have a conjugation category called evidential. By it, the speaker codes the source of evidence he has for his assertion. *Tariana* (Vaupés, Colombia) distinguishes five evidentials by verbal suffixes: visual and auditory evidence, inference from visual evidence or from general knowledge and knowledge from hearsay. Only vestiges of such distinctions may be found in the languages of Europe. When I say 'we' in English, it is often not clear whether I wish to include my interlocutor or not. Many languages have a finer system of personal pronouns that distinguishes between first person plural inclusive and exclusive accordingly as the addressee is included.

Naturally, by the principle of effability, we can also say in English all those things that are coded in the grammar of diverse languages. However, we generally do not say them since our grammar does not require it. And if such distinctions are not coded in the grammar, it is relatively cumbersome to express them. 'Different languages allow speakers to specify different things with ease.'[11]

In education at the school and university levels, teaching and learning a foreign language has a couple of values on the different parameters discussed here. The epistemic value is, of course, to make students see that a language is not simply an inventory of labels for familiar things but an alternative view of the world. Students learn how the world may be conceptualized by other people and how one can widen one's own horizon by taking those alternative perspectives on the world.

The aesthetic value of a language

We are all familiar with prejudices about which language or dialect sounds beautiful and which sounds ugly. As long as one's own language or dialect always

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sounds beautiful, such judgements only evince naïve language chauvinism. However, sometimes opinions of different speech communities converge on the beauty of one language. French is a case in point that I quote here without further discussion.

Such judgements should in principle be objectifiable. It is both possible to obtain majority judgements on the pleasantness of the sound of a language and to correlate properties of its phonological system with such judgements. However, instead of indulging in speculations at this point, let us look at the profit that a poet may draw from the phonological flexibility and adaptability of his language. Here are two examples from Homeric Greek:

E1.	aieì	dè	malakoîsi	kaì	haimulíoisi	lógoisi	thélgei
GREEK	always	however	with_soft	and	flattering	words	she_enchants

thélgei
she_enchants
'she, however, always enchants him with soft and flattering words' (Hom. Od. 1, 56f)

E2.	aûtis	épeita	pédonde	kulíndeto	lâas	anaidḗs
GREEK	again	then	to_ground	it_rolls	rock	tricky

'but then the tricky stone rolls down again to the ground' (Hom. Od. 11, 598)

E1 is from the passage where Kalypso tries to keep Ulysses back on her island. The verses depict the sound of her words with unsurpassable onomatopoeia. E2 is from the myth of Sisyphus. Again the sound symbolism depicting the movement of the stone speaks directly to the imagination. Given effability, the Homeric epics can, of course, be translated into English. Not the least value of the Greek language lies in the fact that no translation can ever hope to bring out the poetic beauty of such verses.

Levels of interest

Given that a value can only be understood as relative to the evaluator, one way of systematizing the discussion is to distinguish levels at which evaluators are organized, i.e. at the levels of the individual, the society and humanity. In principle, every individual and group of evaluators may take all the evaluation parameters of the previous section into account. In practice, however, the parameters have different importance at different levels. For instance, what is of interest for the individual is first and foremost the practical value of a language, while the aesthetic or epistemic qualities of a language will seldom play a role.

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The value of a language for an individual

The individual has fundamentally an instrumental view of a language: what practical advantages will I have if I speak that language? If a person finds that a language is a necessary means to achieve his ends, then he will invest time and money to learn that language. This time and money can be saved to the extent that the person can achieve his goals in his native language. The value of one's native language can, thus, partly be assessed by how much it saves. Native speakers of English, for instance, tend to rely heavily on this advantage.

Which language a child acquires as his native language depends essentially on decisions taken by the parents. Most parents find it important that their child be happy and successful in his life, and to the extent that they have a choice, they choose the languages to teach their children by such criteria. If more than one language comes into question, then in principle the child could learn all of them. Relevant decisions are then complicated by a number of incommensurable considerations. On the one hand, languages differ in the parameters in which they have value. Typically, the traditional language grants integration into the social group and tradition of the cultural heritage, while the dominant language grants individual professional success. On the other hand, the simultaneous acquisition of more than one language by children often results in constant code switching and even mixture of the languages. This infringes upon principles of purity valorized by the older generation, with the consequence that they do not motivate their children to speak those languages and sometimes even discourage them.[13]

For the individual, his native language is the primary means of understanding the world and maintaining social contact. It is normally the only medium that allows him full self-expression. When he is forced to use a foreign language, he feels handicapped or vulnerable. The German writer Thomas Mann spent most of the period of the Third Reich in the USA, supporting anti-Nazi propaganda. He continued to write for a living, but although he could speak English, he never published anything in English. He did not feel that he could express himself in English to his own satisfaction.

The value of a language for a people

The identity of a social group is constructed as a symbolic system. Therefore its language is not only instrumental in the definition of this identity; it is, in fact, a central part of it.[14] While the publications by French intellectuals on the superior nature of the French language mentioned earlier could not prove what they purported to prove, they do show that at all times there have been people who hold their own language in high esteem.

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Social groups shape and recognize their identity by the forms that such social activities as language take. The more important it is to maintain a social structure intact, the more important becomes the role of its language. Probably the most celebrated case of a language that played an essential role in defining national identity is Hebrew. Until the rise of Zionism at the end of the 19th century, the Jews did not have a common spoken language and used Hebrew only for ritual communication. The Zionist movement, however, recognized that national unity could only be achieved if they spoke a common language, and moreover that it should be the language that was inseparably associated with the national religion. They consequently revived Hebrew, which from the early 20th century started being used again as a spoken language and then became the official language of the state of Israel.

The value of a language for the unity of its speech community is, of course, also recognized by its enemies. It is reliably reported that English-speaking authorities in North America and Australia took indigenous children away from their parents and forced them into boarding-schools, where they were forbidden on punishment to speak their native language with each other.[15] This was, in fact, a very efficient way of exterminating the native languages of these countries. Among the many things that one could say about this, one question is presently of interest: why did the Anglophone authorities want to extinguish the native languages? Obviously they felt threatened by them. The language of a social group is a tool that helps that group in organizing activities that are in their own interest, especially if people outside that group do not share those interests. The reverse conclusion from this is, of course, that any social group that does not want to submit to the hegemonic claims of a dominating group is well advised to cultivate their traditional language.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the national value of a language is often promoted not by a people as a whole but by a privileged social group. Those who most ardently defend the necessity of a national language for the identity of their nation are often people who either happen to dominate the standard language and draw personal profit from it, e.g. writers, or who would profit if everybody used the same language, e.g. politicians.[16] It has been proved empirically (Kroskrity[17]: p. 509 *et pass*.) that persons who belong to less privileged social groups and whose variety is not the national standard often care very little about which language they speak and do not see a problem in changing their language.

It seems natural to us that a speech community should valorize its traditional language. Research on endangered languages has, in fact, shown that the opposite situation is not so rare.

> identities do not coexist in the kind of multicultural harmony marketed in the mass media and promoted by liberal education, in which physical, cultural, and linguistic specificities become interchangeable and equivalent differences. In

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> reality, in situations of cultural contact, equal status is won, if at all, through bitter struggle. This fact is illustrated by ongoing efforts around the world to gain some form of official state recognition for the languages of people who have experienced subordination and oppression under colonial rule, nationalism, and global capitalism. (Ref. 14, p. 371; and see the references adduced there)

A people whose language is despised by the dominant majority in the society learns that its own traditional language is worth nothing and begins to take a negative attitude towards it. It has been a commonplace in linguistic surveys of various regions that if such people are asked what their native language is, they disavow their traditional language and claim to be speakers of the dominant language. The Rama in Nicaragua are one of many examples.[23]

Language loss is inseparable from other, socio-economic processes, and therefore difficult to reverse.[18] The success of at least some efforts at language revitalization is the more remarkable. Manx, the Gaelic language of the Isle of Man, was still spoken by some 50 people from among a total population of 70,000 in the 1990s; today, it is moribund. However, the native speaker Brian Stowell has succeeded in reintroducing the language into the school.[19]

By the maxim that other peoples' values are still values, the evident desire and serious effort of a social community to preserve its traditional language constitutes one of the most powerful arguments for the rest of the world to respect this wish and to support it to the extent that it does not conflict with other legitimate interests: 'People and groups have a generic right to realize their capacity for culture, and to produce, reproduce and change the conditions and forms of their physical, personal and social existence, so long as such activities do not diminish the same capacities of others' (Committee for Human Rights[21]). If a social community ceases to speak its language, it may lose its identity and dissolve. A functioning social community constitutes a high value by itself, which is very hard to create anew.

The value of a language for mankind

The uniqueness of a language. The evaluation parameters that are most relevant at the level of humanity are the epistemic and aesthetic values of a language. By its cognitive system and its aesthetic qualities, every language is unique. As a spiritual and aesthetic product, it has higher value than the works of gifted individuals, because a language is the joint product of a community in which all of its members participate, as was already observed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (Ref. 20, p. 410).

The spiritual, artistic or otherwise creative products that we count among the cultural heritage of mankind are generally the achievements of an individual or a selected group of individuals. Of course, not only language, but the whole culture of a people, including its religion, folklore and material culture, is the product of the cooperation of its members. However, language is unique among all the

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spiritual products of men in that all the members of a social community cooperate over generations to create a self-contained system of symbols and operations. What elevates languages over other human products is that 'cooperation of the individuals manifests itself in the formation of languages in a form not to be found elsewhere' (Humboldt, Ref. 20, pp. 411f). Or in contemporary terms: 'each language is recognized as the cumulative product of the creative capacities of the human mind, built up piece by piece as generations of individual speakers make sense out of their experiences and communicate on a daily basis. Under this view each language lost is irreplaceable.'[22] The system of symbols and operations is so complex that no science has succeeded in fully accounting for it. A language may be compared with the Iliad or the Ninth Symphony or the Mona Lisa, except that it is much more complex than any of these and does not stem from an exceptional individual, but from a people. It belongs to the intangible heritage of mankind.

The value of linguistic diversity. In all of the human and social sciences, one of the fundamental problems is the relation of the universal and the particular. This relation has commonly been conceptualized as variation, as expressed in the dictum 'An individual language is a historical variation on the grand human theme of language'.[25] Two things are important in this conception:

- The invariant itself, i.e. human language, does not present itself directly. It appears exclusively under the form of its variants, the historical languages.
- Variation is essential to the nature of the invariant. Human language could never be fully represented by a single historical language.

The dialectic relationship between the universal and the particular is irreducible. Reduction of the variation to one of the variants does not yield access to the universal, but on the contrary leads to uniformity.

In the biological space, diversity is a value. The loss of species leads to impoverishment, to a more deprived life for those that remain. Absolute uniformity would mean the end of life. Thus, if life has a value, then biodiversity has a value. The same is true in the domain of products of human creativity. The arts, literature and music essentially depend on pluralism. If human thinking and creativity have a value, then variety in thinking and artistic production has a value.

The same applies to languages. At the level of mankind, it is not the single language that has a value but more generally the existence of different languages, both in synchrony and in diachrony. The coexistence of so many languages on the globe has often been associated with the myth of Babel and has been interpreted as an evil inflicted upon humanity to which a better alternative exists. A close interpretation of the relevant bible passage[3] reveals that that is not at all what is said there. Instead, the Old Testament presents linguistic diversity on earth as willed by God in order to avoid human hubris. There is little one could wish to add to this.

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Conclusion

The object that a science is dedicated to is naturally a value for that science. It is logical that languages and linguistic diversity constitute a value for a linguist. Linguists engage actively in the documentation of endangered languages and support communities in their efforts to save and revitalize their traditional language. Linguistics is not a value-free science. However, that struggle of the linguist is not just selfish professionalism. It is our responsibility towards our social communities and the rest of the world to help maintain human diversity; this is an integral part of the mission of linguistics.

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