LETTERS TO *LANGUAGE*

Language accepts letters from readers that briefly and succinctly respond to or comment upon either material published previously in the journal or issues deemed of importance to the field. The Editor reserves the right to edit letters as needed. Brief replies from relevant parties are included as warranted.

What do we do with an International Year of Languages?*

March 14, 2008

To the Editor:

The news that there was to be an International Year of Languages in 2008 was received with great acclaim around the linguistic world—once they heard about it! I saw no announcement in the press, and learned about it almost by accident. And the general public is still largely ignorant of it. UN Years are an excellent idea, but they are evidently not being promoted in a way that makes them unmissable and unforgettable.

Another complication is that for each chronological year there is not one but several UN Years. In 2008 our Languages Year is in competition with the International Years of Sanitation, the Reef, Planet Earth, and the Potato. I mean it when I say '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 we have to find ways of getting 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?

I am a great believer in copying the successes of others. How have other enterprises behaved when faced with the problem of how to grab the attention of the public? I have noted five main ways. The linguistic community does only two of these, and even those in a very limited way.

Celebratory days: Religions have festivals, countries have national days, families have days for mothers, fathers, and more. There is Halloween, Shakespeare's Birthday, Bastille Day. We have World Languages Day (September 26) and World Mother Language Day (February 21). 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 that, at an international level, we do not do. I am not suggesting we should all put on fancy dress. But there are other ways. Take cards. I would love to send a card to friends for World Languages Day. I do not know of any. Or take displays. Why not a logo-variation from Google on Language Days?

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. In London there are over 300 major exhibition centers that keep their subject matter in front of the public—textiles, transport, maritime, musical instruments, dolls, and so forth. But for languages there is nothing, in country after country, other than the occasional local institute devoted to a single language, and even that is unusual. One such location devoted to languages in general will be the Casa de les Llengües in Barcelona, scheduled to open in 2010. There need to be others. Don Osborn is collecting data on language museums for IYL 2008. You can see where he's up to at http://donosborn.org/iyl/.

Awards: How does literature become front-page news? Or painting? Or film? Or economics? By giving them prizes, awards, medals—most famously, the Nobel Prizes, and the huge Templeton Prize for progress in religion. Several countries do their own thing. The UK has its Turner Prize for contemporary art. In the US, there are no fewer than twenty-one categories of Pulitzer Prize. In relation to language, there is next to nothing—just the small Linguapax Award and a few others in specific areas, such as translation. Why aren't there more, and why aren't there any really well-known ones?

The value of an award is not its monetary value, which can be quite low, or even nonexistent. Rather, it provides professional recognition to an individual or institution, motivation for action to that person's or institution's peers, and an opportunity for publicity for the subject that the prize-winner professes. Prizes 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. Write-ups do not say 'director Ang Lee' but 'Oscar-winning director Ang Lee'. The attribution is significant: it transforms a name from someone one might not know about (if one is not a specialist) into someone that one SHOULD know about. And it identifies subjects—areas of knowl-

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edge—that one feels one should know about. We need to get language into that position.

Artworks: How do we remember someone or some event? We build a monument or statue: think Lincoln. We write a play: think *Henry V*. We write a piece of music: think the *1812 Overture*. We paint a picture: think Picasso's *Guernica*. We make a film: think *Amistad*. I could go through the whole range of the arts and point to the artworks that commemorate and thereby keep a topic in the forefront of our minds. But where are the artworks devoted to language and to languages?

I am not of course talking about the individual 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 about many other languages. I am talking about commemorations of language in general, languages, language diversity. Why do not such things exist? If Godfrey Reggio can make three films and Philip Glass can write three associated suites to focus our minds on cultural diversity and alternative ways of life (*Koyaanisqatsi*, *Powaqqatsi*, *Naqoyqatsi*), why cannot someone do the same in honor of linguistic diversity? There ought to be a yearly commission to provide an artwork on the theme of language, perhaps with a different art-form every year—literature, film, painting, music, dance, and so forth.

Reliable data: Finally, there has to be a task, in any UN Year, that engages the mind rather than the heart. Several urgent tasks face us. One is the ongoing documentation of previously undocumented languages. Another is the need to update information about already documented languages. Take the invaluable *Ethnologue*. In a report submitted in 2006 to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, John Paolillo and Anupam Das (*Evaluating language statistics: The Ethnologue and beyond*; http://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~paolillo/research/u_lg_rept.pdf) took a random sample of 2001 entries for population data from the 2005 edition and found that 52.4% had sources before 1996, with 2.1% dating from between 1975 and as far back as 1920. An IYL can provide a motivation for us all to evaluate the up-to-dateness of our reference sources.

What I seem to have ended up with is a time-honored approach—a five-point plan. We need Locations, Awards, Days, reliable Data, and Artworks. A LADDA, in short, toward which we can climb toward public recognition. We have one of the rungs in place (days) and are moving toward a second (locations). Might we have a third rung of the ladder in place by the end of 2008? Or even all five? I dream on.

David Crystal
[david.crystal@dial.pipex.com]

* This letter is an abridged version of a paper delivered to Unescocat, Barcelona, on the European Day of Languages, September 26, 2007. The full paper is available at http://www.crystalreference.com/DC_articles/Langdeath20.pdf.

Editor's reply: There are certainly a 'LADDA' good ideas here and many thought-provoking remarks that deserve our serious attention. I note briefly, regarding locations to visit, that the Exploratorium in San Francisco has exhibits pertaining to language and languages, and SIL sponsors a Museum of the Alphabet in Waxhaw, North Carolina; there are undoubtedly more language-related locations that could be listed (I appeal to readers for some help here). Moreover, two colleagues of mine here at The Ohio State University, Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, a sociolinguist, and Laura Wagner, a psycholinguist, have been involved in language-related data-collection projects at a local science museum (COSI, i.e. Center of Science and Industry) that offer some insights about language to participants, so there are surely other museological opportunities that could be developed. Read on for a report on activities elsewhere specifically to mark this year.

International Year of Languages, Peruvian style

April 18, 2008
To the Editor:

Greetings from Lima, Peru. As readers of *Language* surely know, the United Nations has declared 2008 to be the Year of Languages. This well-received news is a bit overshadowed locally by the fact that 2008 is also the international Year of the Potato, the potato being what is often called 'Peru's gift to the world'. There are scores and scores of varieties in area markets, and the annual, national 'Day of the Potato' (May 30) is celebrated with original theatrical performances, readings, poetry, conferences, and, of course, gustatory and gastronomic events of every kind.

SIL and the Peruvian Ricardo Palma University (URP) have agreed to cosponsor a number of local events to celebrate not only Language in general, but the scores and scores of languages spoken throughout the country, from Quechua and Aymara in the Andes, to the many jungle languages of the Amazon basin. Since much of SIL's work of the past sixty years in

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Peru is being completed, we are downsizing our operation and our space requirements. The University's Central Library has agreed to hold SIL's extensive linguistic and anthropological library in custodianship, making it available to students and aficionados of language throughout Lima, a city of over eight million. It will still be SIL's library, but Ricardo Palma will house the collection and make it available to all comers.

Second, we're presenting a new book of Quechua texts, edited by David Weber and Elke Meier. The book is an accessible mix of academic and cultural insights that highlights Quechua continuity and change through time. Interestingly, the Rector of URP, Iván Rodríguez Chávez, knew Cameron Townsend, the founder of SIL, and used texts from SIL publications of some of our old timers for his own dissertation research on national literature. So he's a very appropriate presenter of this new volume.

Finally, every semester we have a series of SIL and URP faculty talks on some topic of interest—code-switching, ergativity, linguistic relativity, and so forth. These evening events usually draw thirty to sixty people. This year, the talks will be fortnightly for the entire academic year (until December)—all on some aspect of language revitalization. Presenters will include SIL members, URP faculty, and students who are themselves native speakers of indigenous languages of the Americas. We tentatively plan to make these talks the basis of an edited volume—in Spanish—on language revitalization 'in the trenches'.

So we may not be able to compete gastronomically with the potato, at least not in Peru, but we're looking forward to getting the word out about the impact and import of Language in this, its year.

Best to you and all *Language* readers,

WESLEY M. COLLINS
[w_collins@sil.org]

Editor's reply: Well, readers, now that you have heard about it, what are YOU planning to do for the International Year of Languages in what remains of 2008? (I discussed World Mother Language Day with my students in my 'Language endangerment and language death' class in February, but I realize now that more is certainly called for—my freshman seminar students in the autumn may get an earful!)

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