



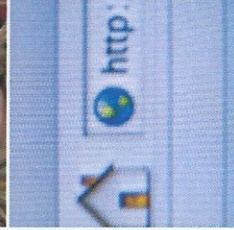
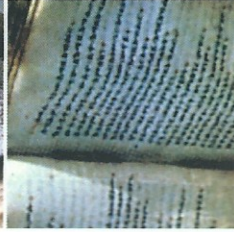
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# MULTILINGUALISM IN CYBERSPACE

Proceedings of the Ugra Global Expert Meeting

Government of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – Ugra  
Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO  
Russian Committee of the UNESCO Information for All Programme  
Interregional Library Cooperation Centre  
MAAYA World Network for Linguistic Diversity

## Multilingualism in Cyberspace

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The book includes papers by the participants of the Ugra Global Expert Meeting on Multilingualism in Cyberspace (Khanty-Mansiysk, Russian Federation, 4–9 July, 2015), aimed to discuss policies in the field of language preservation, measures to be taken at both national and international level to develop linguistic and cultural diversity of the world and promote multilingualism in cyberspace.

The authors are responsible for the choice and presentation of facts and for the opinions expressed, which are not necessarily those of the compilers.

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## SECTION 5. MULTILINGUALISM FOR WELL-BEING

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### National Languages and “Minoritized” Languages in a Long-Term Perspective

#### 1. Introduction

It is almost clear that digital content per sé it is not good or bad in relation to “minoritized” languages as it happens for knives (you can cut bread or kill someone).

Let us analyse the process in a long-term perspective. Documents and different formats, media and alphabets survived for centuries and millennia reaching us as a legacy from past generations. They are still accessible, readable and mostly understandable. In Pompei (Naples) we can still read graffiti on plasters promoting a Roman politician or supporting a local sport team. Furthermore, ancient minority languages such as Etruscan are still readable as well.

What will happen in 50, 100 or more years to our documents and, much more concerning, to documents written in “minoritized” languages?

#### 2. Our language, our legacy

As we already discussed on the occasion of the digital preservation meetings and related outcomes and recommendations, the future of digital assets is not safe at all, digital media are disintegrating, logical formats disappear, and hardware has a short expectation of life. Apart from similar concerns, let’s consider, as an assumption, that digital preservation problems will be cleared. Which kind of documents, content, knowledge, “culture” will be transferred to future generations?

How can we foresee the future not only of “minoritized” languages but also even of major languages that are not the dominant ones?

What will happen to “minoritized” languages? Even if today translators, virtual keyboards, extended alphabets, and more really facilitate the creation and translation of documents written in a “minoritized” language into a different language, the concept of networking itself relies on a “common/shared” language.

One possible scenario presupposes that “minoritized” languages will not “fully” enjoy the opportunities offered by the network while “major” languages and, much more, “dominant” languages will take full advantages of networking. Information and knowledge will be transmitted, shared mainly through major and dominant languages. Main information channels, research documents, cutting edge technologies will be coded in dominant languages. Competitive advantage will be relevant for those who master that language.

This means that at the end the gap between the two realities will increase. If you want to be part of the “leading team”, share knowledge and know-how, you must write, read, and think in a dominant language.

### **3. The future of national languages**

In a similar perspective, “national” languages are present to different extents on the Internet and participate to information and knowledge sharing. Nevertheless, in order to exceed the “orbit” of national boundaries such outcomes must adopt a dominant language. Again we can foresee an increasing gap between “national” languages and “dominant” ones. No matter what the “dominant” language of the time is, today it is English, tomorrow it may be Chinese or Arabic.

If we consider a historical perspective with reference to the adoption of different languages and even cultural behaviours we can, for instance, refer to the youngsters in the Venetian republic. They used to grow up and get education in Middle East countries in order to speak and behave as Arabs did. Once adults they used to trade with Arabs and this was the best training for them. The same happens even today; it is often enough to speak the local language to enter a completely different relationship with people. We must remember Nelson Mandela’s words: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

It happened many times in the past that the “dominant” language of the time – Latin, Spanish, French – was adopted by researchers, writers, and artists, but this time, due to the Internet and other powerful media, the risk for national languages to leave the foreground of the scene is more relevant.

Not only “minoritized” languages are under threat, sometimes, and nowadays many times, even national languages are in danger. Languages are living creatures, they change, evolve adopting neologisms, incorporating foreign words, acronyms, and idioms. In order to keep a language alive we must speak, exercise and study using that language. Of course this is not the only aspect to be considered but it is for sure one of the most relevant.

#### 4. A key choice: languages in educational institutions

If marketing managers, on the one side, use to segment the market multiplying the number of products and options and offer different items on different markets, on the other side, companies dream of a "planet" of homogeneous customers: one issue, one taste, one language. The trend imposed by globalisation influences not only our behaviour and taste but even our educational environment.

Neither speak about foreign languages courses included in different curricula ranging between primary schools up to university nor about the option to attend a course in a different language, these are positive opportunities.

The actual trend is to switch between national languages to a dominant language only. Such a choice, often not offered as an option, is inspired by the will to extend the "audience" and align with the dominant language of papers and publications in general. Some universities decided to offer full curricula in the dominant language only for better internationalisation indices and to attract foreign students.

Such a change may not be considered "neutral" with reference to local knowledge, cultural assets and identity (quotation, idioms, references, etc.). The idea to abdicate in favour of a dominant language represents a real threat for national languages. Dominant languages will be gradually enriched while local ones will be deprived day by day.

We can analyse the situation taking adequately into account different aspects that all together influence the result: subjects, speakers, audience, and comprehension.

#### *The subject*

A specific subject may influence the impact due to the language; major part of subjects do have a preferred language at least at the high level. For instance in Europe, German seems to be the official language for maths and geometry just as English is preferred for information technology or as it happens for Italian in the field of music. Of course, it may happen that the history of Renaissance architecture has good bibliography in English even if it refers to an Italian style. Anyway it is common understanding that the ability to study Dante Alighieri knowing Italian language as well as to read Cicero in Latin, Pushkin in Russian and Shakespeare in English provides some added value and a different level of comprehension of the text (nuances, etc.). Language certification of both students and professors, when requested, is not enough. The transition between a set of lectures, workshops and exercises from the local language to another language takes some time and resources. It is not a simple matter of proper translation, although this is not a simple task of itself. We all know how difficult is to "render"

the same "concept" in a different language. How boring a translation of a brilliant speech may be if flattered by the standard vocabulary of a translator. We loose local references, jokes, idiomatic forms, intonation, meaningful pauses and non-verbal content. What about bibliography and workshops? We must rethink and reshape everything almost from scratch. How long will this process take, how much efforts will be devoted? Will the overall quality of the final "product" be comparable to the original one? We really don't know.

### ***The Mentor***

To be forced to attend courses in a language that it is not our mother tongue may mean: a "foreign language" mother tongue speaker having a perfect knowledge of the specific topic, terminology, buzzwords, and tricks; on the opposite, a local speaker with limited knowledge of the foreign language, terminology, buzzwords, etc., this is a real mess. I remember the early books in the field of computer sciences literally translated by professional translators, having no background in that young field. They were very hard to understand just because of the lack of a shared glossary.

### ***Human Capital***

As there is often no clear idea about the university's human capital, the result is a flattered set of courses. They loose, we hope not forever, the richness of meanings, nuances, and appeal. From the management point of view, there is a declared ability to understand and speak a different language or languages but this doesn't mean to teach in a different language. This is probably a consequence of the "black and white" logic in opposition to the fuzzy logic. What happens in live interaction? Students pose questions in their national language and it gives start to a funny mixed language interaction resembling much more a movie's scene than a university lecture.

### ***Content***

Apart from the considerations mentioned above, one of the potential aims of dominant language lectures is to provide an opportunity to work in a global market, to offer a worldwide approach to the specific topic. This means that the content of the course itself has to be reshaped in an international perspective. As already outlined this takes time and resources and is not a simple "porting" of the same content in a different language.

### ***Students***

It is not for sure that the use of a dominant language will attract or facilitate

Some students coming from abroad may not share the same dominant language. They may be much more interested in learning the local language than starting from scratch to learn the dominant language. Quite often their own reduced ability to speak and understand the language overlaps similar problems on the mentor's side. All these aspects will decrease the quality of the educational system.

Such a situation even increases the gap between local students and foreign students, the first group will always be able to come back to their own mother tongue in order to ask further explanations or reply to questions on the occasion of exams. The second can't. We cannot accept the shift of the goal from knowing the subject to knowing the language.

### **5. Long term perspective**

Following this trend in the future all major outcomes will be written in a dominant language loosing the richness due to different ways to express similar aspects. If it is true that the way we think is connected to the way we speak and read together with cultural behaviour, we will lose a relevant patrimony.

Which kind of legacy will we transfer to future generations? Will the existent gap between national languages/culture and "minoritized" languages/culture increase exponentially? Will "minoritized" cultures be squeezed and preserved in museums only?

At the same time, what about the future of national languages and cultures? Shall we face a "dominant culture/language" only? Will major scientific achievements, literature, history of art and art itself be flattered and unified to the dominant one?

This is a real danger due to the dominant communication media and news. This has never happened in the past centuries, and the richness of different cultural approaches and knowledge was the main engine of growth. Today the "reduced" size of the world due to efficient transportation and globalisation together with global communication channels makes it possible even if not desirable.

### **6. Final considerations and conclusions**

Many years ago, a key player, Microsoft, launched on the market the first version of a digital encyclopaedia (one world - one encyclopaedia). Very soon they discovered that this was a dream. Each country, each culture has a different way to interpret facts and history (in the US telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell in Italy it was Antonio Meucci).



Will pupils and students be deprived of their own native culture or perceive it as an archaic form of culture?

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## Language Inequality, Multilingualism and Development

### Abstract

In many multilingual societies, language barriers are a reality in a range of domains, and structure socio-economic outcomes. In this contribution, I aim to put forward the question of language inequality (that could be measured with a “Gini coefficient of language”), as an under-considered but crucial factor in socio-economic development, that is increasingly leading to “language flight” in emerging economies, with a negative impact on linguistic diversity.

How does language inequality articulate with the three goals of achieving MDGs/SDGs, universalising cyberspace and preserving linguistic diversity, that have been the object of the IFAP Expert Meetings on Multilingualism in Cyberspace?

Economists on the one hand suggest that the lower the linguistic diversity, the better for the economy; conversely, language advocacy appears to have a humanistic focus on diversity for its own sake, with a rights-based approach for its defense. Can cyberspace be the “pivot” for untangling the “wicked problem” of reconciling diversity with development?

To this end, I propose that it is crucial to explore the linkages between linguistic diversity, language development and economic processes, in terms of both description and measurement, within the discipline of Language Economics.

### Introduction

The role of the language barrier in the digital divide has received considerable attention, and is a key topic of the Ugra Global Expert Meeting on Multilingualism in Cyberspace. Can cyberspace also serve to overcome language divides in the “real world”?

I develop this theme in relation to the three goals of achieving Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), universalising cyberspace and preserving linguistic diversity that have been the subject of current and past deliberations, in the form of four points.