

Breathing Life Back into Language

Every day, somewhere in the world, a child, a woman, a man, stops speaking their mother tongue. The world's languages are disappearing faster than ever before in human history. Predictions are that 90 percent of the world's languages are in danger of dying out within a century. The linguistic diversity that has been an essential characteristic of the human species is being replaced by a system in which some languages are expanding at the cost of others.

This is now true within national states and the global system. Control over someone's language has become one of the primary means of exerting power over other aspects of people's life. Language is one of the essential keys to cultural and personal identity. The present situation poses a great risk to human diversity.

This crisis has led social movements and organisations, human rights advocates, scientists and many others to address the worldwide problem of disappearing and oppressed languages. Among these attempts is the People's Communication Charter (PCC).

The PCC was drafted by human rights campaigners in 1995 as the common framework for a permanent movement on the quality of a sustainable communication environment.

The Charter contains 18 Articles dealing with communication rights and responsibilities, including the right to cultural identity and a diversity of languages.

In order to gain the support of civil society at

national and international levels, the PCC, World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) and OLON organised the first public hearing on the Charter at the ISS from 1 to 3 May 1999, the theme of which was "Languages and Human Rights."

WACC's general secretary, Carlos Valle, explained WACC's involvement in the hearing: "The only possibility of creating community in this world is providing that human beings can express themselves openly, thereby liberating themselves from oppressive bonds."

WACC states in its *Christian Principles of Communication* that communication is a fundamental human right. WACC puts the right to language at the core of the right to communicate.

"Language is the house of our identity," asserted Ariel Dorfman, the respected Chilean writer, who took part in the hearing and highlighted the fundamental importance of linguistic diversity. "If they burn down that house, we are left with nothing. It is essential to understand that every language in the world, whether five or five billion people speak it, has equal rights. When you destroy a language, you destroy the capacity

of human beings to be as diverse and as plural and as expansive as possible."

Dorfman and his fellow judges listened to the testimonies of five witnesses seeking to ensure their linguistic rights. The cases were brought on behalf of Creole languages, Kurdish languages,

**When you
destroy a
language, you
destroy the
capacity of
human beings
to be as diverse
and as plural
and as
expansive as
possible.**

Top 20 Languages by Population

The *Ethnologue* is a catalogue of more than 6,700 languages spoken in 228 countries. (Find it at www.sil.org/ethnologue). The population figures in this table refer to the first language speakers in all countries. The data was last updated in February 1999.

Language Name	Primary Country	Population
1. Chinese, Mandarin	China	885,000,000
2. Spanish	Spain	332,000,000
3. English	United Kingdom	322,000,000
4. Bengali	Bangladesh	189,000,000
5. Hindi	India	182,000,000
6. Portuguese	Portugal	170,000,000
7. Russian	Russia	170,000,000
8. Japanese	Japan	125,000,000
9. German	Germany	98,000,000
10. Chinese, Wu	China	77,175,000
11. Javanese	Indonesia	75,500,000
12. Korean	South Korea	75,000,000
13. French	France	72,000,000
14. Vietnamese	Vietnam	67,662,000
15. Telegu	India	66,350,000
16. Chinese, Yue	China	66,000,000
17. Marathi	India	64,783,000
18. Tamil	India	63,075,000
19. Turkish	Turkey	59,000,000
20. Urdu	Pakistan	58,000,000

sign languages, bi-lingual education in California, and Berber language (Tamazigh).

To consider these test cases, the panel focused its public hearings on Article 9 of the PCC, which reads: All people have the right to a diversity of languages. This includes the right to express themselves and have access to information in their own language, the right to use their languages in educational institutions funded by the State, and the right to have adequate provision created for the use of minority languages where needed.

Kurdish language was considered by the judges to be under particular threat, with the

Turkish authorities forcibly attempting to kill the language and Kurdish culture with it.

Creole languages have a history of stigmatisation, marginalisation and official neglect. Kennedy Samuel, from the Folk Research Centre (a WACC member in St. Lucia), brought the Creole case to the panel: “(There is) history of official neglect, repression, and discrimination against its speakers,” he said. “As a result there has been very little development in the language over the years.”

The Creole language of St. Lucia is Kwéyòl. English is the official language of the island, and the exclusive language of the Parliament, the courts, public administration, and formal business and trade. Kwéyòl leads a marginal existence, although it is the mother tongue of most inhabitants.

“The visual media has absolutely no regular Creole programme and do very little that features Creole culture,” continued Samuel. “Radio has made many strides in this direction in the last 10 years but this is over balanced by the tremendous influence of television, particularly on the younger

generations. One major consequence is the rapid loss of the language among the younger generation and problems for the passing of indigenous cultural heritage across generations.”

The judges recommended that in St. Lucia, an official language policy should be created that would lead to the development and elaboration of Kwéyòl, its increased use in technology and modern media, teacher education, and collaboration with Creole-speaking communities in other countries.

Source: *action*, No. 216, June 1999

Web Contacts: Terralingua: <<http://cougar.ucdavis.edu/nas/terralin/home.html>> • Linguistic links: <www.sal.tohoko.ac.jp/~gothit/geng9805.html> • The Ethnologue: <www.sil.org/ethnologue> • Universal declaration of linguistic rights: <www.troc.es/mercator/dudl-gb.html> • Ethnic world survey: <www.partal.com/ciemen/ethnic.html> • European minority languages: <www.smo.uhl.ac.uk/saoghal/mion-chanain/Falite_en.html> • Linguistic Society of America: <www.lsadc.org/langrite.html> • Clearing House for Endangered languages: <www.tooyoo.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/ichel.html> • UNESCO site on linguistic rights: <www.unesco.org/most/ln2bib/html>