

Sustainability in Language Diversity

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The world's language heritage is increasingly threatened and many of the more than 6000 languages spoken today are about to disappear. With the Herderian ideology of "one people - one language - one nation", language nationalism was a crucial component in nation-building efforts of 19th century Europe. This ideology made states the natural enemy of language diversity and indeed has forced minority languages out of use; hardly more than a collateral damage in the formation of European language nations to some. What is more, the vision of monolingual nations being the ideal modern states spread to non-European countries; for example, Japan and Korea. In sharp contrast, African countries, with few exceptions, did not take up the ideology propagating linguistically homogeneous nations. The colonial burden of imposed, largely arbitrary borders, the linguistically heterogeneous settings and the occurrence of widespread multilingualism, prevented linguism to expand to state level, as it did in most other parts of the world.

Today, the world experiences an exponential increase of contact through electronic media, global economics, world religions, etc. and globalization also reshapes the language map. Kinds of English spread, usually acquired as an additional language. Within the next few years, according to a UNESCO study, English will be spoken by halve of the world's population. In most developed countries, persistent long-term language nationalism, combined with the spread of English as a global lingua franca is set to bring up one common multilingual regime, namely the national dominant language (as mother tongue of all citizens) plus English.

Attempts aiming at supporting the sustainable development with language diversity need to consider the various language shift environments in which languages are abandoned by their speakers. People no longer live in isolation and small languages will only survive, if stable multilingual settings can be established. Language use patterns need to be carefully managed, also with know-how gained from success stories of language revitalization, such as from the Hawaiian revitalization movement. In view of widespread ideologically mediated language endangerment in developed countries, the examples from the African continent, where about one third of the modern languages are spoken, deserves the attention of all those seeking ways to foster language diversity. Such efforts, however, must be embedded in a much wider framework and need to aim at overcoming economic and sociopolitical subordination, based on an ideology of equality and solidarity.