The status of linguistic norms

BRONCKART, Jean-Paul

World Languages Review aims to examine the sociolinguistic situation of the world; to describe the linguistic diversity that characterizes humanity; to evaluate trends towards linguistic homogeneity; and to establish a set of guidelines or language planning measures that favour the weaker endangered linguistic communities, so that anyone engaged in language planning - government officials, institution leaders, researchers and community members - can implement these measures.

"Past few decades have seen widespread recognition of the importance of ecological and cultural diversity and of the threats that currently face this diversity. While the world’s linguistic diversity has not at the forefront of these considerations, the phenomenon of language endangerment is anything more acute than the danger to biological species and to other aspects of cultural diversity. This new succeeds in presenting language endangerment in a way that combines detailed scientific analysis with justifiable social concern and in making this area of concern accessible to a wide audience."

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"An extraordinary ability to combine empirical data and strategic recommendations, this review of urgent necessity to protect linguistic diversity is both a fascinating and an accessible work of science. It is also a manifesto for responsible action, so that we do not lose more of our common heritage in the name of so-called progress and globalised modernity. The authors, UNESCO Elxera and Linguistic Matters have made an important contribution to the understanding of one of the major challenges of our time and coming decades."

Professor Colin H. Williams, Cardiff University, UK

Martí was Director of the UNESCO Centre of Catalonia (1984-2002) and President of the UNESCO Committee on Linguistic Pluralism and Multilingual Education (1999-2003). Paul Ortega is Director of UNESCO Elxera-UNESCO Centre of the Basque Country and is now Secretary General of the European Union for Multilingual Education. Itziar Idiazabal is Professor at the University of the Basque Country. Amatria is Professor at the University of Salamanca. Patxi Juaristi is Professor at the University of the Basque Country. Carmen Junyent is Professor at the University of Barcelona. Belen Uranga is the editor of the survey carried out for the World Languages Review and Estibaliz Amorrortu is the editor of the review.
Halbi spoken in and around Jagdalpur is considered a standard one. All India Radio broadcasts programmes in Halbi. The only local newspaper of Bastar Dandakaranya Samachar publishes News in Halbi in Nagarasain. Hence, this standard variety is recognised. Hence, Halbi spoken in the central part of Bastar is considered the standard one. (Halbi, India)

- And although sporadic, there is no shortage of associations between the concepts of standard language and artificial language. In the same way, there are those who speak of changes in acceptance of the standard.

During the 1950s, the vernacular form used in Jinhu town in Jiannan Country was considered to be the standard form. However, over the past few years, it has been replaced by the vernacular used in Xizhou Town in Dali City. (Bai, China)

However, most accounts considered that having a standard variety is good for prestige and especially for allowing the use of language in writing. The disparity of opinions confirms the range of circumstances that can affect the creation and development of a standard variety. It is also very important to point out that, as the information shows, the standard variety is not essential either for written use or for literary production and even less so for the survival of a language. The informers seemed to be clear that it is their use, both orally and in writing, that ensures the survival and development of languages.

In the same way, it cannot be said either that the existence of a standard variety necessarily ensures written literary production. A wide range of situations can arise in the development of languages and their written varieties, be these considered standard or not. Within the group selected, the languages with a standard that nevertheless lack a literary tradition account for 35%.

**THE STATUS OF LINGUISTIC NORMS**

Linguistic norms can be defined as codified products of social judgements concerning the particular human activity called language.

Language has two obvious characteristics: it is extremely diversified and it evolves with the passing of time. **Diversity** is first of all external: language is realised through multiple natural languages, which differ from one another in their phonology (types of sound units exploited to produce meaning), in their lexicon and their morphosyntactic rules. **Diversity** is also internal: within each language there are coexisting varieties linked to regional, socio-economic, personal differences, etc. As to change, it affects the whole dimension of natural languages, even if evidence of it requires long periods of time. This variability of languages is due to the fact that the significance of their constitutive units, or signs, is permanently renegotiated through use and these signs organise themselves in paradigms of terms competing to express the same reality. It is also due to the fact that these signs get organised in communicative forms, i.e. oral or written texts, the function of which is to comment on diverse and changing human activities, and the structure of which partially depends on the very characteristics of those activities. But this variability is also dynamic: each natural language (and each variety) constitutes a system able to transform itself to express any item of knowledge and any process of thought. In this sense, languages constitute systems of expression whose potentials are strictly equivalent whether they have a writing system or not. Social judgements concern one or another aspect of this functioning of language and produce four different kinds of norms.

- **Functional norms** are related to the conditions of use of a particular natural language; they indicate the choice of signs and of texts that, regardless of any intrinsic value judgement, seem more accurate or more suitable in a determined situation of communication, to express content or comment on an activity.

- **Cultural norms** are related to the presumed quality of language productions, and therefore largely depend on aesthetic judgement. They can translate into a comparison of languages, leading us to consider that some of them could be more complete or more logical or "nicer" than others, and also leading us to consider that the best languages could be those that both possess a writing system and have been the subject of technical descriptions. Cultural norms generally give more importance to the characteristics of written forms compared to oral forms and, within written forms, they favour a subgroup of a literary nature.

- **Theoretical norms** result from the steps made towards language knowledge in philosophy or in linguistics. In philosophy, an important thread claims that the structures of languages are but the direct translation either of a logic of the world or of a logic of thought, both of universal status. In this perspective diversity and change are disturbing phenomena and hence they remain under-analysed and de facto undervalued. In linguistics, many works of empirical analysis of languages have been carried out but none of the models built on these bases could pretend to give a full and homogenous vision of their characteristics. Yet researchers often tend to consider that the only existing language properties are those they manage to describe, which again entails a depreciation of some varieties, particularly oral ones.

- **Political norms** are linked to centralisation and education measures undertaken by the States. Relying on the concept of State unity and citizen equality prevailing from the end of the 18th century, they translate into the definition of a standard language that would be a kind of common language elaborated from multiple varieties in use, and that would serve at the same time as the
have indications concerning the communicative relevance and appropriateness of the different units and structures proposed by the same language system.

Finally, although the language standardisation process seems inevitable, due to the conditions of functioning and reproduction of modern societies (through education), it is convenient not to convert standard languages into instruments of a fight against diversity and change, i.e. against the effective modalities of language functioning for the majority. To ensure their democratic role standard languages must consider the effective practices that are open to change and diversity, in other words they must permanently aim at creating a balance between the general need for intercomprehension and the diverse and rich linguistic solutions used by human subgroups to achieve it.

Jean-Paul Bronkart
University of Geneva, Switzerland

Written literary tradition

It is worth repeating that there is no natural living language that does not have a literary tradition, and the fact that this may be oral does not mean that it is of an inferior category to written literature.

In the survey, though, the question refers to written literature. This question was not always properly understood, since many of the informants thought it referred only to literary tradition. This fact led many informants to insist, quite rightly, that regardless of the greater or lesser written tradition, the languages they were informed on had a rich literary tradition.

Even so, 39% of the sample languages appear as languages with a written literary tradition. In many cases, of course, there is reference to religious texts, to educational material for initial literacy or for primary education, and to the publication of collections of literature from the oral tradition, either historical, cultural or folkloric. These characteristics of the written production are what justify the undoubtedly positive numbers as regards the experience of written literature.

Amongst the languages mentioned as having religious literature are Ashaninka (Peru), Kabiye (Togo), Kaqchikel (Guatemala), Karay (Russia), Lango (Uganda), Migama (Chad), Naasoi (Papua New Guinea), Ndau (Mozambique), Sakapulteko (Guatemala), Tiv (Cameroon), Burushaski (Pakistan), Triqui (Mexico), etc. Then there are literatures with a basically oral tradition, which have recently begun to be collected and published. Finally, we might mention more ancient literatures as in the case of languages like Friulian (Italy), Ladino (Israel), Otomi (Mexico), Poqomchi' (Guatemala), Rajasthan (India), etc., each of which has a different history and experience.