Languages and globalization: time for action

CHAIR OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

Address by

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Excellencies,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In this, the International Year of Languages, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you first of all, as is our African tradition, in the language of our host country:

Konishua

Kombawa

And now let me further this courtesy by welcoming you in my own mother tongue, before doing so in the official languages of UNESCO:

führer der deutschen Sprache

Kombawa

The task of leading the International Year of Languages, conferred upon UNESCO by the United Nations Conference, is a very serious one in the eyes of the Executive Board. For us, it is not enough to be satisfied with isolated and symbolic gestures without a future. Our task, as we understand it, is to engage in a process of reflection which will produce suggestions for concrete action on the ground. Within this context, it is my great pleasure to announce that the subject of our thematic debate during October’s 180th session will be: “The protection of
indigenous languages threatened with extinction, and the contribution of languages to the promotion of EFA for the purposes of sustainable development”. Our hope is that the work of this conference will make important contributions to this debate.

What are the key issues relating to languages in the context of globalization? These concerns are very well known and recognized, at least at UNESCO. I am not therefore going to distract and bore the specialists that you are by speaking to you of dead languages, of threatened or violated identities, of the violation of cultural diversity or of the irrevocable loss of knowledge that is nonetheless vital to our humanity.

I would prefer to dwell on what has received less recognition: the need for urgency in this action – hence the somewhat provocative title of my short presentation. Please allow me to point out a few myths and to state a few truths, for, as Jaime Torres Bodet, one of this Organization’s Director-Generals, once put it: “the other name for UNESCO is truth”. On this subject, I do, however, have a small confession to make: some of my linguist friends, to whom I had proudly described our conference as an event, have pointed to what they call my “naïve enthusiasm”. “Yet another UNESCO meeting!”, they retort “You’ll see, nothing will come out of it but pious wishes and more bumf to fill the reports written by your Organization’s civil servants”. I am afraid that UNESCO’s track-record regarding languages over the last 15 years justifies their pessimism. The truth is that there is a gulf between what we promise and what we deliver. We are doing little, too little, for languages, in light of what we know about them and of the scientifically-motivated recommendations made by linguists. Once again therefore, the one challenge above all others is action.

Our conference will address an important thematic of our times: globalization and its relationship with an essential tool for communication, existential expression and the incarnation of cultures and of societies; namely language or languages. These represent the most creative and sophisticated gifts that Man possesses and may prove to be as precious as life itself.

We should therefore keep in mind that the protection and promotion of all languages guarantees the survival of diversity, and that the way in which we treat languages will serve as an indicator and a measure of the face that we wish to give to globalization.
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My aim, in the little bit of time given to me, is:

(a) to demolish a few of the deeply-rooted myths surrounding this question and, in doing so;

(b) to reiterate some simple truths, by reaffirming the primary truth and the real importance of language’s place in personal development and the importance of broaching the global objectives fixed by the international community, in this case the MDGs, the EFA and the DD.

It is clear, in accordance with the principle of reality, that, as the Canadian linguist Mackey has put it so pertinently and so bluntly: “Only before God and linguists are all languages equal”. From UNESCO’s point of view, however, it is just as clear that languages should also be equal before policy-makers, in the name of the cardinal principle of democracy, of the equal dignity of cultures, of human rights, of non-discrimination and of equality of opportunity.

For this reason, UNESCO should proclaim loud and clear and the other members of the United Nations should join them in chorus to declare that a true linguistic policy is nothing other than society accommodating and adjusting to linguistic diversity.

If it is possible to avoid linguistic discrimination on a political level by according all languages the same chances of promotion and development, in reality it is impossible to obtain an equality of roles and functions and therefore an equality of prestige and status. However, is such equality necessary? In a plurilingual context, different languages assume different functions and play different roles. We must work towards a dynamic complementarity between these roles and functions. The vision of one uniform language is really just a fiction, a figment of the imagination. All language is heteroglossic in the sense that it is characterized by a complex stratification of genders, registers, styles, sociolects, dialects and by an interaction between these categories.

But intellectual honesty forces us to recognize, as a Nigerian linguist has noted, that the general attitude towards minority languages and even towards those spoken by tens of millions of speakers in the majority of ex- or neo-colonial countries can be resumed in the five following key phrases, going from the worst to the most harmless:
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(1) eliminate them;
(2) assimilate them;
(3) tolerate them;
(4) neglect them;
(5) safeguard them.

But let us come to the myths. The first is that linguistic multiplicity forms an obstacle to national unity within states.

Linguistic policies must therefore handle this question by starting from the premise of the European nation states that see a single language as the only guarantor of national unity. The existence of several languages slows down progress towards national unity. One language alone must therefore be retained, at a stretch two and, exceptionally, three. In other words, national unity requires official monolingualism and the use of several languages accentuates inter-ethnic conflicts. The only way to smother and avert such conflicts is to have one trans-ethnic and a-tribal language, usually the European language of colonization.

The real picture is that multilingualism is the norm, the normality. Monolingualism is really the exception, whereas the practice of multilingualism is widespread. In African countries, for example, an average of more than 30% speak at least three languages. Elsewhere, this multiplicity is even greater and becomes a real spectre. The number of recognized languages in Africa varies from 1,200 to 2,500. Such a statistical discrepancy makes no sense. It is evidence either of the ignorance surrounding this question or of a deliberate attempt to blur the data. The reality is a mixture of these factors. Languages and dialects are poorly defined in Africa. The research conducted by Kweshi Prah, a Ghanaian sociolinguist working in one of Cape Town's universities in South Africa, has established that there is a large degree of intercomprehension between several families of African languages which cross the continent from East to West. Detailed dialectal surveys carried out in Mali on the Dogon language have identified a standard way of speaking that has a 70% degree of intercomprehension with the region’s eight other dialects. Yet the generally accepted view is that villagers from two neighbouring villages in this zone are unable to understand one another, as their language is so dialectally fragmented. On the global level, we are becoming aware that half of the world’s languages are concentrated in only seven states.
If this version contained a grain of truth, civil wars would never have existed in human history. It is not languages in themselves that generate conflicts but rather the messages of hate dictated by struggles for domination that inflame people’s hearts and lead to wars. The genocide committed in Rwanda, one of the rare countries with a tendency towards monolingualism, and the role played by the famous Radio Collines reminds us of this fact in the most horrid of ways. The collapse of the Somali state, another country with strong linguistic homogeneity, must convince us of the absurdity of this theory.

The second myth claims that the widespread use of the mother tongue risks leading to isolation in these days of globalization and constitutes an obstacle to the promotion of international languages. Research carried out by the UNESCO Institute for Education in more than forty multilingual countries on all continents, as well as this institute’s recent survey in conjunction with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) covering 22 African countries, has demolished this myth. This research should reassure policy-makers of the validity of the multilingual option which favours maintaining the promotion of mother tongues rather than the classic model of supporting and supervising the introduction of the international languages that have the status of official languages, sometimes even of exclusive languages, in the majority of the countries studied. This research has shown us, above all, that prematurely interrupting the use of the mother tongue results in the interruption of the learner’s cognitive and academic development.

I will only mention the myth of “under-developed languages” or languages “ill-adapted to scientific discourse” here because it remains pernicious and widespread. Scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop already sought to destroy it more than half a century ago, and states like Israel, Malaysia and Indonesia refute it in practice before our very eyes.

A last myth, the substance of which politicians are more sensitive to, is the cost of introducing mother tongues into the education system as a medium for teaching and of the promotion of unofficial languages in general, including in literacy training. This cost is reputed to be exorbitant, if not simply prohibitive.

Here at the present time, no serious research allows us to give credibility to these claims, which, as well as being a myth, amount to a useful spectre and a pretext for inaction. To be taken seriously, any notion of cost should first evaluate what the exclusion of the mother tongue and the hegemonic use of the colonial
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languages for nearly half a century after independence has cost us, for example in each African country.

We can calculate that this cost must be not only exorbitant but simply monstrous, especially in light of the expected and obtained results and of the poverty of the populations which have made these sacrifices. In addition, I would argue that UNESCO, under its mandate, must also consider an intangible, uncountable conception of the cost incurred by the non-use of mother tongues and draw it to the attention of Member States and decision-makers: alienation, damaged or negatively obliterated identities, brain-drains, the sometimes irrevocable loss of knowledge and skills and so forth.

The rapid examination of these myths allows us to conclude that unless we recommend that states adopt a courageous, resolute policy of multilingualism which reflects the world’s linguistic diversity, promotes the introduction of mother tongues into formal education, and enables languages to assume different roles and functions within organizations or politico-cultural entities in a dynamic complementarity, as defined in agreement with their speakers, we risk:

1. never attaining the EFA goals in the countries of the South, veritable bottomless pits, even though the budgets allocated to education are and are becoming larger and larger;

2. increasing the North-South divide by preventing certain languages from coining technical vocabulary and from being used in scientific research;

3. worsening the social fractures in the countries of the South by favouring a “North” in the South, while nevertheless encouraging the brain-drain from the South to the North;

4. making us unwitting accomplices to linguicial policies and cultural genocide;

5. promoting a hemiplegic and therefore inhumane form of globalization;

6. finally, failing in our cardinal mission of constructing peace in the minds of men.

I would like at present to conduct a very brief critical appraisal of UNESCO’s action in the field of languages over the last 15 years. It will, to a certain extent, be a sort of self-evaluation, not to pull the rug out from under your feet but rather
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to show you that at UNESCO we are aware of our weaknesses and our shortcomings. On this subject, the praise must however precede the criticism. Since the historic 1951 conference on mother tongues, UNESCO has, in effect, done a wonderful job regarding languages. It has thus inspired, undertaken or supported work of great pertinence and quality involving the standardization and “technicalization” of languages; fundamental and applied research into language; the translation of works representing cultures and civilizations; the development of basic linguistic infrastructures and even the backing of national, regional and international institutions for the promotion of languages. This work has borne very satisfying results and, very early on, established our Organization’s reputation as a key actor in the fields of language promotion, cultural emancipation and in trying to build dialogues among civilizations.

Yet, over the last few years, there appears to have been a change of direction. UNESCO has altered its priorities and its strategy, for reasons which will, one day and in the right place, need to be examined. Instead of the operational work to which it had devoted its efforts, which corresponded to the expectations of populations the world over and which paid established dividends, the Organization currently concentrates its attention, without any well-grounded research to back it up, on a dubious bilingualism. This strategy considers mother tongues to be stepping stones and yet puts its weight behind official international languages which thus become the telos or the main beneficiaries of its work. Such an approach, we must presume, can only be justified by a disregard for the prevalent multilingualism that it thus tarnishes and of which the complexity requires solutions which cannot be accommodated within a simplistic bilingual framework.

There is also reason to worry, in light of the Organization’s movement away from the operational work of linguistic development, about the new directions which favour access to cyberspace and languages threatened with extinction. Without any doubt, all languages have a right to cyberspace. But what sense is there in discussing cyberspace in relation to a language which has no space on Earth among the community of languages with literate environments? And can we be taken seriously when we lament the fate of a language spoken by a thousand speakers but do not concern ourselves with either the survival or the empowerment of those people? Indeed, when, at the same time and without any soul-searching, we pay no heed to the survival of a language spoken, like Yoruba, by more than forty million souls and which, in the long run, is just as
threatened with death because it is not taught and is still not equipped to be a medium for teaching at all stages of the education system? Such an attitude is the equivalent of snivelling over a dying individual, while refusing to apply the appropriate remedy to all the members of his village who suffer from the same illness.

In conclusion, UNESCO is going to have to reconsider its strategy and its priorities as regards language if it hopes to regain its prestige in this area.

I would like to end this short introduction to your debates with some suggestions, while continuing to insist on the need for urgent action:

1. to bring about, on a global level, an awareness of the role of languages and notably of mother tongues in education and economic and social development;

2. to underline, through its advocacy, the normality and the positive aspects of multilingualism and multiculturalism;

3. to bring knowledge in this field up to date, especially the *World Language Report*, and to publish research, good practices and selected case studies of discussions and of international and intercultural perspectives;

4. to create, on a UNESCO level, a special intersectoral platform for languages and to concentrate once again on operational activities and on supporting regional and subregional centres for the promotion of languages;

5. to suggest, as a follow-on from the International Year of Languages, the creation on a United Nations level, of an international observatory for languages, multilingualism and cultural diversity. Our conference should outline the objectives and the content of this observatory.

I will no doubt have the opportunity to speak further with you about all these points during your workshops and I wish you the best of luck in your work.

*Arigato, Merci.*

Thank you for your kind attention.