

UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme: whose beliefs, what ideologies?

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My paper will discuss the beliefs and ideologies on endangered languages of three types of UNESCO stakeholders, and the organization's difficulty in catering for everyone's needs.

The first category is the Member-States (i.e., various governmental agencies and institutions) who determine UNESCO's orientations and main lines of action. The ideologies of this group are very diverse, ranging from active support to active oppression, and many different "shades of grey" in between. A matchingly wide assortment of social theories is put forward to justify the preferred policies at both national and international levels.

The second group is the academic community, or the experts. The Member-States and the Secretariat usually turn to this group for consultative services involving studies, reports, recommendations and evaluations.

The third and, ironically, least influential, group is the speakers of endangered languages who approach the Secretariat with queries for funding, international recognition or both.

I will then discuss the channels and mechanisms available to each group to pursue their agendas.

- Member-States.

Organized into a General Conference (once every two years) or an Executive Board (twice a year), they constitute the "governing bodies" of the organization and take decisions concerning the budget and programme.

- Experts.

Their message is conveyed through various Expert Meetings organized by UNESCO, their consultative services, project reports and publications.

- Speakers.

Until very recently, their only option was to appeal (using post, email, telephone and fax). Since a few years, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues provides a unique platform to raise matters related to endangered languages on par with the Member-States. A few additional, less prestigious but more immediate, mechanisms have recently been proposed by UNESCO, soliciting inputs and suggestions from speakers via the Internet.

To conclude, I will argue that the ideologies of the first group are so diverse that they can only yield general principles (such as encouraging bilingualism or documenting severely endangered languages), but are often irreconcilable in specific situations. The second category have more consistent beliefs but lack the leverage offered by the status of the other two categories. As regards the last category, the speakers, it should be borne in mind that the vocal advocates who contact UNESCO are in general moved by personal beliefs rather than mandated by the "silent majority" whose preferences are extrapolated but never known for sure.