

# The 2005 UNESCO Convention or the lack of thought concerning linguistic diversity

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## Abstract

The article analyses how the issue of linguistic diversity, despite being present in many of UNESCO's texts, reports and declarations, was sidestepped in the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Although reflections on the safeguarding of the world's languages have contributed to the realisation that linguistic wealth is a precious common good, they are not reflected in the Convention, translating de facto as a major climbdown from the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, a text that is supposed to shape the guidelines of the 2005 Convention.

## Keywords

Cultural diversity, linguistic plurality, minority languages, multilingualism, linguistic policies.

## Resum

L'article analitza la manera com la qüestió de la diversitat lingüística, tot i que present en un gran nombre de textos, informes i declaracions de la UNESCO, va ser escamotejada a la Convenció de 2005 sobre la protecció i la promoció de la diversitat de les expressions culturals. Si bé les reflexions sobre la salvaguarda de les llengües del món van contribuir a fer prendre consciència que la riquesa lingüística és un bé comú preciós, no apareixen a la Convenció, que tradueix de facto una retracció important respecte de la Declaració universal sobre la diversitat cultural, un text amb vocació de guiar les orientacions de la Convenció de 2005.

## Paraules clau

Diversitat cultural, pluralitat lingüística, llengües minoritàries, multilingüisme, polítiques lingüístiques.

The preamble to the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions states that "linguistic diversity is a fundamental element of cultural diversity" and emphasises the vital role of education in promoting the languages of the world.

This reminder is surely beneficial and would be even more so if the recommendation in question (which on the whole seems rather laconic, since it is never once repeated in the 100-page document) was on the one hand explicitly defined (what is meant by "linguistic diversity"?) and, on the other hand, led to concrete measures.

This marginal reference to the diversity of languages spoken around the world, especially regarding what some linguists analyse as the linguistic effects of globalisation [Calvet 2002], is strange, especially since UNESCO produces a number of texts on the future of the world's languages, including the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, published in 1996 and regularly enriched and updated (Wurm 1996, 2001; Moseley 1996, 2010), the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity [UNESCO 2001], and the post-Convention worldwide report

entitled, *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*, a chapter of which is devoted to multilingualism and linguistic revitalisation [UNESCO 2009]. It discusses the international institution's concern for the disappearance of the world's languages, with, in the case of the *Atlas*, a well-documented and accurate record of languages that are at risk or have disappeared. But these texts do not have the force of a convention enshrined in the international legal frameworks that are supposed to inspire the nation-states.

Therefore, one is entitled to question the silence of the Convention regarding the issue of protecting and promoting linguistic diversity, the absence of precise definitions and recommendations, and the fact that the linguistic issue is considered a mere subcomponent of cultural diversity without explaining the organic correlation between language and culture. There is a real problem that arises from marginalising the cultural, political and economic stakes of the linguistic issue, which seems to me to be central to cultural debates. It is this lack of proper consideration that I would like to address here via the following three points:

1. Some comments regarding how UNESCO is approaching cultural diversity and the theme of linguistic diversity in this general context.
2. A reasoned assessment of the notion of linguistic diversity in order to show how fundamental it is to take it into account in international and national policies as an element contributing to peace and security in the world.
3. A critical analysis of the shortcomings and limitations of the 2005 Convention.

### Cultural diversity and language issues

It must be stated at the outset that this essay does not seek to comment on the numerous debates on the question of cultural exchanges as it has been posed within UNESCO, both regarding NOMIC and regarding the notions of cultural exemptions or, more recently, cultural diversity. Critical appraisals and reviews establish the origins of reflections among the various Member States of UNESCO and analyse, for example, the political economy of communication [Mattelart, 2005a and 2005b] or the law [Neuwirth 2006], tensions over how to deal with imbalances in the production and circulation of cultural goods, the difficulty of positioning themselves against the doctrine of free flow of information promoted by the United States or against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in order to exempt cultural and symbolic goods from the logic of a globalised market, and of which semantic shift from the notion of exemption to that of diversity is one of the indicators.

At the outset, it is important to emphasise that the term diversity is polysemic, “a catch-all that embraces contradictory realities and positions, ready for all contextual compromises” [Mattelart 2005a: 3]. The interpretation is so broad that a general consensus arises: an expression derived from a sort of diplomatic language with shifting and fuzzy semantic contours [Huyghe 1991], which could indeed be opposed to the promotion of this diversity, whether it be the international institutions or states, communication groups, companies working in the cultural industries sector, artists, cultural actors or associations? However, there exists a range of opposing interests amongst those who advocate the need to protect cultural productions or the need for public policies, those who wish to promote the mingling of cultures and see it as a new democratic principle, those who envisage culture as a marker of identity and those who rely on the rules of a deregulated world market addressed to solvent audiences whose tastes must be conditioned. This expression, which is lax and systematically connoted in a positive way, has thus gradually replaced the notion of cultural exemption, which is more demanding with regard to protecting cinematographic or audiovisual works, both within the agenda of the UNESCO debates and that of the European Union [Mattelart 2005a].

Polysemic when applied to culture, the notion becomes contradictory when it comes to languages, insofar as the term, implying that there is a wide variety of languages in the world,

puts them (to a certain extent) all on an equal footing, while the reality is quite different. Never before has the spectrum of languages used on the planet been so threatened, with a drastic reduction during the 20th century which is rapidly increasing in the 21st century. A few figures will allow us to get an idea of the scope of the phenomenon, which has been widely studied and documented on an academic level. In this manner, linguists evoke the programmed death of a large number of languages [Crystal 2000; Hagège 2000; Wurm 2001; Moseley 2010]; 96% of 5000 languages are spoken by only 4% of the world's population [Grimes 2000] indicating how they are practised by a limited number of speakers; 50% of them do not have a writing system, which condemns them to die irretrievably along with their last speakers and leaving no traces, in the process taking away the wisdom and knowledge that they express; 25 languages disappear each year [Hagège 2000] and this movement is accelerating in the era of globalisation, information and communication technologies and the development of cultural industries: the UNESCO project *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* estimates that over the 21st century more than 3,000 languages will have disappeared, accounting for nearly 50% of the total [Wurm 2001: 14].

This also translates into a drastic reduction in the number of languages into which books are being translated: 20 languages, of which 16 are used in Europe, account for 90% of translations, again with English reigning supreme, since 55% of the works in question are translated from English, while only 6.5% are translated into that Anglo-Saxon language. [UNESCO 2001: 81-82] These figures show how the existence and visibility of non-hegemonic languages are threatened by new forms of cultural imperialism.

In other words, the notion of cultural diversity seems to be wishful thinking when linguistic practices are reduced to next to nothing, an endangered language ranking as one that is no longer learned by 30% of children because they no longer learn their mother tongue at home with their families [Wurm 2001: 14]. In short, these observations are pessimistic when the process of revitalisation is hampered by the absence of transmission to the younger generations, when languages “lack economic power and independence [...] a stable infrastructure and, in most cases [...] literacy.” This is emphasised in the latest version of the UNESCO Atlas, which hopes that review work can lead towards “the common awareness of humankind and the common good of its Member States “[Moseley 2010: 10].

In this context, it is not certain that we can speak of a “linguistic diversity” that would involve protection and promotion at best. If we agree to define linguistic diversity as the variety of possibilities to which a human being has access - for example, the option consisting of immersing oneself in a community to learn to speak, or undergoing a school curriculum to learn to read, or even the proliferation, the multitude, the abundance of languages considered to be on an equal footing on the cultural, political and legal level, as a kind of pool from which a person sensitised to polyglotism can draw freely according to his or her interests and expectations, it must be recognised that the

choice is reduced in favour of a few international languages, ones which are well established in specific territories, virtual networks and cultural properties, benefiting from educational or media structures, valued on a political, cultural and economic level. Contrary to figures regarding the extreme fragmentation of so-called minority linguistic practices (see above), 3% of major languages are spoken by 96% of the world's population [Bernard 1996: 142]. As for the Internet, it mirrors these inequalities with only slightly over 500 languages present online [Crystal 2000: 142].

UNESCO has been aware of this very worrying situation since the International Congress of Linguistics held in Quebec City in 1992, prompting the international institution to launch the Red Book for Endangered Languages Project in 1993. The first report was published in 1996 and is regularly updated [Wurm 1996, 2001; Moseley, 1996, 2010]. In the wake of the 31st session of the 2001 General Conference on the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity [UNESCO 2001], let us also reference the work of the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages of March 2003, that is attempting to fight threats to the most vulnerable languages.

It can be clearly seen that when specifically addressing the international challenges of linguistic diversity, UNESCO is giving priority to those measures that aim to rescue endangered languages - half of those used on the planet - and to revitalise them, especially via education and plurilingualism: it is time for awareness and mobilisation in a situation of major linguistic crisis [Krauss, 1992]. In other words, the linguistic issue is not entirely foreign to the concerns of UNESCO, which has largely contributed to the promotion of a set of recommendations to defend multilingualism in the States.

### So what of linguistic diversity?

In a time of globalisation of trade, whether it be economic or cultural, whether it concerns tourists, migrants, refugees, students, merchants or entrepreneurs, the linguistic question is a paradox. Indeed, the more people trot the globe, merrily skipping over borders thanks to the speed of communications media, the more they must share the same auxiliary language to understand each other: this shared language does not need to be mastered perfectly in terms of its semantic, phonological and syntactic subtleties, as in the case of Globish, a simplified version of American English which serves as a vehicular language for executives, traders, entrepreneurs and researchers worldwide [Nerrière & Mellot 2010]. Over the centuries, several languages of this type have served international trade, such as the *lingua franca*, a mixture of Italian, French, Venetian, Turkish, Greek used in the Empire of the Levant and which helped to forge Mediterranean unity [Kahane & Tietze 1958; Dakhli 2008].

In this context, why exactly should we defend the variety of languages spoken on our planet, when many agree that trade globalisation represents a chance to end the 'curse of Babel'?

After all, it would be simpler to retain a few languages to better communicate and converse: this was the project of Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto, which he sought to promote as a universal language from 1887 onwards. Through the internationalisation of communication systems, this trend is already present with the pervasive presence of the American English in cultural products (books, translations, films and TV programmes) and on the Internet.

However, in an educational system open to linguistic plurality and interculturality, the two options are by no means contradictory. Indeed, while nobody denies the merit of mastering one or two major international languages of communication - such as English or even Spanish - there is nothing that bars the teaching and practice of vernacular languages whose territorial sovereignty, however limited it may be, must not jeopardise the cultural heritage upon which it capitalises. The question is one of hegemony, and how to envisage the creation and dissemination of knowledge through languages, some of which are more vulnerable than others.

In this regard, those UNESCO texts that deal with language issues are very explicit as to the reasons for protecting and defending languages, and give strong arguments against those who believe that the hegemony of a few international languages is normal, that languages have always historically disappeared because of cultural mingling or imperial and colonial ventures (in the case of the Romans), that certain cultures are not adapted to the new challenges of globalisation, or that persist in thinking about languages and cultures in the terms of evolutionary hierarchies. In this manner, approaching this issue, the *Atlas* states that

"Each language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex, mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. In this, each language is the means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of a people, and it remains a reflection of this culture for some time even after the culture which underlies it decays and crumbles, often under the impact of an intrusive, powerful, usually metropolitan, different culture." [Wurm 2001: 13]

The end of the quotation also illustrates the linguistic tensions in a very competitive market where some are better rated than others [Calvet 2002], but also where the disappearance of languages is not compensated by the appearance of new ones: in this way, in the course of the 20th century, an infinitesimal number of languages emerged: Hebrew, for example [Crystal 2010: 127], as well as various creoles and sign languages.

A language also expresses knowledge, as is the case in many indigenous societies which have a long empirical knowledge of so-called traditional pharmacopoeias (Boumediene, 2016), biotopes, and sophisticated and diverse techniques for agriculture, hunting, fishing and tool-making. Not to mention literary or poetic expressions, tales and legends. This is

expressed in the 2009 international report in another form:

“Languages mediate our experiences, our intellectual and cultural environments, our modes of encounter with others, our value systems, social codes and sense of belonging, both collectively and individually. From the perspective of cultural diversity, linguistic diversity reflects the creative adaptation of groups to their changing physical and social environments. In this sense, languages are not just a means of communication but represent the very fabric of cultural expressions; they are the carriers of identity, values and worldviews.” [UNESCO 2009: 71].

Or, echoing the remarks of the American sociolinguist Joshua Fishman:

“A language’s vocabulary is an organized catalogue of a given culture’s essential concepts and elements. Taking the case of indigenous cultures, the requirements of Pacific Island cultures differ from those of Siberian reindeer-herding cultures. The language traditionally associated with a culture is in general the language that relates to that culture’s environment and local ecosystem, the plants and animals it uses for food, medicine and other purposes, and expresses local value systems and worldviews.” [UNESCO 2009: 79]

The same Atlas expresses astonishment that one can be concerned about the extinction of animal or plant species, without the threat to biodiversity taking into account the disappearance of “one of humanity’s most precious commodities – language diversity” [Wurm 2001: 19], especially since the lifestyles of the people who speak these languages very much depend on the balances they have built with their natural environment. We find the same comparison in the 2009 report, where linguistic diversity is considered an indicator of biodiversity:

“To exhibit such a correlation between the richness of some groups of organisms and the number of languages worldwide, an Index of Biocultural Diversity (IBCD) was created. It represents the first attempt to quantify global biocultural diversity by means of a country-level index. The IBCD uses five indicators: the number of languages, religions and ethnic groups (for cultural diversity), and the number of bird/mammal and plant species (for biological diversity). The application of this index revealed three ‘core regions’ of exceptional biocultural diversity.” [UNESCO 2009: 78]

Lastly, we should mention other remarks that echo the theses of anthropologists for whom nature and culture constitute the two essential components of the construction of the human being:

“While biological and cultural diversity may have evolved differently, they have nonetheless constantly interacted to produce human and environmental diversity as we know it today.” [UNESCO 2009: 217]

Even if one can be somewhat circumspect about the presuppositions of such an association between the biological

and the cultural (Latin American countries use it to build their tourist communication, essentialising the natives in the process), this does not prevent this index from illustrating the correlation between the fragility of the communities’ lifestyles and that of their biotope.

This succinct review shows, if proof were necessary, that the way in which linguistic diversity has been defined or theorised within UNESCO’s various bodies and working groups demonstrates an acute awareness that the disappearance of languages, which all express and mediate new cultural forms, would lead to the irremediable loss of wisdom and knowledge. Just as the Malian writer Amadou Hampaté Bâ pointed out about the disappearance of the former custodians of Africa’s oral cultural heritage, “When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground”.

### The limits of the 2005 Convention

In the first analysis, the adoption of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in October 2005 is a positive step forward: the vote of the 154 countries that attended the 33rd UNESCO General Conference was unanimous, with the exception of four abstentions and the two negative votes of the United States and Israel. The text thus endorsed constitutes a “symbolic step [since] by recognising the specific nature of cultural activities, goods and services, it establishes the premises of a supranational right which runs counter to the plan for the excessive liberalisation of culture, reduced to one commodity among others”<sup>1</sup> [Mattelart 2005b - 3]. Furthermore, the choice to talk about “diversity of cultural expressions” opens the field far beyond cinema, audiovisual and cultural industries to all cultural forms of human groups and societies.

However, on closer inspection, the text of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions falls short of the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which is supposed to prepare the ground for the drafting of the 2005 text. It was true that the declaration was drawn up when the Americans were not members of UNESCO, only observers; it was not until 2003 that they were able to influence debates and water down the elements of reflection contained in the declaration. “Vague concepts” and “shadowy areas”<sup>2</sup> in the drafting of the Convention [Mattelart, 2005b: 25], when we approach linguistic issues, references are rare and vague: in addition to the mere occurrence of the term “linguistic diversity” in the preamble, there is a reference in Article 6 to “measures relating to the language used for such activities, goods and services”. The role assigned to cultural diversity is so insignificant that certain analysts believe it is not just a mere oversight but a genuine attempt at marginalisation in a context of globalisation where, following the quarrel over cultural exceptions regarding audiovisual and cinematographic productions, textual information would have lost ground and “[focusing] on the audio-visual aspect of culture would ensure

better control of the effects of globalisation than focusing on languages via writing”<sup>3</sup> [Ben Henda 2006: 46].

This is a far cry from the statement of 2001, which stated more precisely the importance of “safeguarding the linguistic heritage of humanity” (Article 5), “encouraging linguistic diversity – while respecting the mother tongue – at all levels of education, wherever possible, and fostering the learning of several languages from the earliest age”(Article 6), or “promoting linguistic diversity in cyberspace and encouraging universal access through the global network to all information in the public domain.” (Article 10). Similarly, the relationships between cultures and identities are clearly explained, most notably for minority languages, and cultural rights are considered as a factor in social and political cohesion:

“In recent years, there has been a growing understanding that the full implementation of cultural rights is a prerequisite to peace and security. The safeguarding of cultural diversity is inseparably linked to the preservation of the much-cherished cultural identity of nations or ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities and indigenous peoples; and it is crucial to the unhindered development of human personality.” [UNESCO 2001: 24]

In addition to the education sector and the Internet, other recommendations advocate encouraging translations, continuing the work of mapping endangered languages, developing an intercultural approach to indigenous peoples, dubbing and subtitling films and audiovisual productions, promoting multilingualism systematically in schools as a “psycholinguistic and political challenge” or allowing everyone to have linguistic tools enabling him or her to move from one world to another. Specific solutions are proposed to achieve these objectives: immersive studies, class exchanges (UNESCO wishes to sponsor a scholarship system), the establishment of clubs or the development of international research into pedagogical linguistics and intercultural communication. Linguistic diversity is defined therein as a necessity and not a luxury, given that with the multilingual skills acquired, everyone can access all information available in the public domain: the Declaration even specifies that mastery of a “universal” language such as English is not the best way to encourage access to the wealth of cultural content available. Multilingualism is widely promoted at all levels of human activity, from primary, secondary and higher education to the training of web masters, as well as journalists, media professionals and true polyglot teachers.

The text of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity is certainly ambitious and comprehensive for those interested in minority languages. It is completely in line with the concerns of ethnolinguists, who are alerting countries and international institutions to the disappearance of the world’s languages. It is militant in advocating a humanist approach to the plurality of languages, striving to rebalance their place in public space, viewing the linguistic mosaic as a wealth to be defended and valued, working towards the training of polyglot individuals open to otherness and curious about the world.

Ultimately, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions seems to have been totally redacted from that which formed the focus of the discussions at the 31st Conference in 2001. There is no doubt that this represents opposition from many countries, not only the United States, who have difficulty in defending and promoting disparaged and devalued languages on their own territory for reasons linked to historically conflicted relations with their minorities [Guyot 2015]. As such, migrants arriving on the American continent have for a long time never claimed special treatment on a linguistic level, with mother tongues remaining confined to the private or community sphere; the progressive spreading of Spanish as the country’s second language is undermining a state that had never envisaged including an article in its Constitution stipulating that English is the only official language. This is not the case in France, which since the French Revolution has been built on a Jacobin tradition based on the principle that linguistic plurality constituted an obstacle to political unity: as such, when France signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in June 1992, it voted in the same month for a constitutional amendment specifying that French is the official language of the Republic, which then allowed the government to not ratify the European Charter. We can also recognise the implicit role played by the Member States in international or supra-national discussions where linguistic issues primarily affect the appreciation of official languages in debates or as working languages. The minimalist mention of linguistic diversity ultimately leaves the field open to the broadest interpretation.

Among those sectors that definitely remain in the shadows, let us return to the promotion of *petites cinématographies* (in French, ‘small films’), a field of productions carried out by and / or dedicated to subordinate groups: women, speakers of minority languages, and minority peoples. [Ledo, 2013] Due to their distribution within confined linguistic spheres, these film productions are vulnerable and without proactive policies to aid production and distribution, they are doomed to disappear. Indeed, it is unprofitable niche markets such as these that tend to be shunned by the cultural industries, which by the nature of their vocation work on a large scale in standardised, globalised markets. For the cultural industries, the major problem when an audiovisual product needs to be produced in a minority language is, of course, the limited size of the audience on behalf of whom they must pay additional costs for dubbing or subtitling.

There is another issue that is not considered in the 2005 Convention: communication policy oversights. This fact is however essential to the linguistic expression of minority groups and peoples who, in terms of the media sector (another issue not considered by the Convention) and the Internet, are subjected to the dominance of the major international languages of communication, with English in particular still accounting for 45% of online content in 2007 [Pimienta et al. 2009]. The place of languages in audiovisual media reveals, in general terms, a demand to instate a “right to communicate”, the only alternative for safeguarding spaces for the expression of social

groups, associations and artist collectives; as for the Internet, as has happened with NOMIC, it is undoubtedly time to think about a new world order for networks [Mattelart 2005a: 99]

In this respect, other international and supranational texts are more long-winded on linguistic issues. This is the case with ILO Convention 169, which is more prescriptive even though, strictly speaking, it only concerns indigenous and tribal peoples [ILO 1992]. However, it is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of 1992 which provides the most ambitious framework for defence, with a set of very precise provisions concerning the various fields of human activities: education (Article 8), justice (Article 9), administrative and public services (Article 10), media (Article 11), cultural activities and facilities (Article 12), economic and social life (Article 13) and cross-border trade, with the obligation for those countries which have ratified it to “apply a minimum of thirty-five paragraphs or sub paragraphs chosen from among the provisions of Part III of the Charter, including at least three chosen from each of the Articles 8 and 12 and one from each of the Articles 9, 10, 11 and 13.” [European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, 1992] Admittedly, it only concerns the so-called historical languages of the European continent, of which there are a small number when compared to other continents. Nevertheless, the Charter is the most successful example of the Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which should have been used to document linguistic issues.

When analysed from the viewpoint of protecting and promoting the world’s languages, especially those which are in danger, the UNESCO Convention can only lead to disappointment, since no concrete measures affect the process of linguistic revitalisation or the implementation of measures encouraging the development of multilingual policies at the level of the member countries, nor is there anything to ensure a balanced and fair presence in public space, the education sector, the media or in cultural exchanges.

In this context, the linguistic issue, considered as a component of cultural diversity, is in a way the ‘poor child’ of UNESCO’s reflections, despite the essential role that languages play as vectors for the diversity of cultural expressions within the context of global symbolic exchanges.

## Notes

1. Translator’s note: This is my own translation as the source text is not, to the best of my knowledge, available in English.
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