



ASEM LANGUAGE DIVERSITY FORUM Background Paper

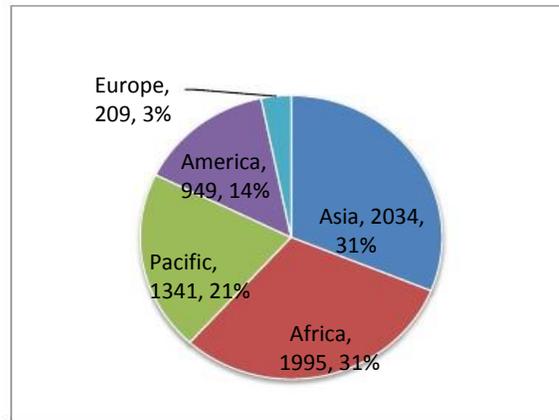
Introduction

Language is an innate human ability. The apparent ease with which we learn and use language masks a great complexity and makes us take language for granted. However, without language, humanity would not have civilization, religion, science and technology. The scientific study of language can therefore be seen as having profound implications linked to all kinds of human activity. A language perspective can throw light on a range of areas of knowledge, including culture.

An understanding of the languages of the world helps us to appreciate the great diversity that exists. Indonesia is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world. From a national perspective, this diversity is strength as it can widen our perspective. Every language can be seen as a “window on the world” a way of seeing it.

Looking at the world’s language diversity, an important question to ask is how this diversity came about. This is the question of language evolution. Current mainstream thinking on this suggests that language originated in our distant ancestors around 100,000 years ago in Africa. Through early migrations, these early humans dispersed over some tens of thousands of years to all parts of the earth. Over this time, what would have been a very simple start for language evolved, developing in complexity. When people moved to live in different places, communities developed separately and so did their languages. In this way, about 15,000 languages eventually appeared.

The distribution of languages around the world is not even. Some geographical regions have a higher concentration of languages than others, making them more linguistically diverse. Of these, Asia is the most diverse and Europe the least as shown in the following graph.



As can be seen, in Asia there are 2034 languages accounting for 31% of all the world's languages. African also has great diversity with 1995 languages or 30% of the world's total. Next is the Pacific region, including Australasia, with 1341 languages, or 21% of the world's total. Meanwhile, America has 949 languages or 15%. Finally, Europe has a mere 209 languages or 3% of the world's languages¹. However, despite the limited diversity of European languages, along with the process of colonialization, European languages have dispersed throughout the world and now have very large populations of speakers. This is particularly the case with regard to English, French and Spanish.

It is well-known that the expansion of English as a global language has accelerated over the last few decades. This can be understood because in this global era, there is a strong need to have a "common language" that acts a lingua franca across countries. The dominance of English is basically influenced by the political and economic needs for a global language that is spoken and used everywhere worldwide. We can see that English is nowadays used widely in the media and films, it is chosen by politicians on TV, and it is also used as signs on public areas. Furthermore, the challenge to establish and market "world class education" for non-English speaking students has contributed the importance to make English as the language of academics.

In addition, De Grauwe (2006: 2)² stated the relation between economic development and language diversity:

"Economic development is based on specialization and trade. Individuals who specialize and trade must develop common means of communication. This in turn leads to the use of a common language. Thus as countries move on the ladder of economic development and increase the network of trade both within and outside the country, a common language will impose itself and will be used by an increasing number of individuals. This then puts pressure on the local languages, and in the long run will push many of these into extinction. Thus in the long run

¹ Crystal, D. 1997. *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 289

² De Grauwe, P. 2006. Language diversity and economic development. http://www.econ.kuleuven.be/ew/academic/intecon/Degrauwe/PDG-papers/Work_in_progress_Presentations/EcDev&Languages.pdf (accessed on 12 November 2011)

economic development will lead to a decline in the number of languages and in language diversity.”

This causal relation indicates that for the purpose of international trade, countries that have a common language tend to trade more than those that are multilingual. In other words, the use of the same language will enhance economic growth and development because people can communicate better. However, this turns out to be a negative development *vis-à-vis* language diversity around the world.

The number of languages spoken today across the world is variously estimated at between 6000 and 7000 languages³. Estimates suggest that close to half of these languages are doomed or in danger of disappearing in the foreseeable future. As the death of a language means the demise of its culture, the disappearance of any language is, therefore, an irreparable loss for the heritage of all humankind. Safeguarding this diversity today is one of the most urgent challenges facing our world. Between 2001 and 2003, a UNESCO ad-hoc expert group on endangered languages collaborated with the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in Paris to draft a preliminary version of the UNESCO report *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, as well as the *Recommendations for Action Plans*.

Concern for cultural diversity, of which language diversity is a pillar, is increasingly being raised in the international arena and in the research sphere. Two complementary lines of thought which underlie the rising concern for cultural diversity are so prominent. The first line of thought concerns more generally the need for protection of cultural diversity as an “ethical imperative”. The UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* in 2001 recognised for the first time cultural diversity as a “common heritage of humanity” and considers its safeguarding to be an “ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity”. Article 1 of the declaration states as follows:

“Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations (underlined by the authors)”.

Only four years after the Declaration’s adoption, on 20 October 2005, a *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* was adopted. It eventually recognised the need to take measures to protect the diversity of cultural expressions, including their contents, especially in situations where cultural expressions may be threatened by the possibility of extinction or serious impairment.

³ See, for example, Austin, P.K. and Sallabank, J. 2011. *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Bisang, W., Hock, H.H., and Winter, W. 2007. *Language Diversity Endangered*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter

The second line of thought behind the rising concern for cultural diversity refers to the more specific field of languages. Since the early 1990s, there has been a universal increase of professional language concern about the unprecedented scale of language death facing the world. Linguists are becoming increasingly alarmed at the rate at which languages are going out of use.

Oral traditions and expressions, including language is one of the five domains of intangible cultural heritage to be safeguarded under the 2003 UNESCO *Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*⁴. Article 2, Paragraph 2 of the UNESCO 2003 Convention states as follows:

The “intangible cultural heritage”, as defined above, is manifested *inter alia* in the following domains:

- (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;

Three of the other domains of intangible cultural heritage as defined by the 2003 Convention are also framed in and dependent on language diversity; namely,

- (b) performing arts;
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe⁵;

The UNESCO 2005 *Convention on Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expression*⁶ considers language diversity a fundamental element of cultural diversity⁷. The 2005 Convention lists provisions with respect to language used in cultural activities, services and goods among possible actions which might be taken States Parties to protect and promote diversity of cultural expression⁸.

In response to the increasing international concern, a series of meetings was held within ASEM. In addition, more specific discussions on cultural diversity and possible collaborations between Asia and Europe have also been held at ASEM ministerial levels.

The ASEM Culture Ministers meeting related to language diversity, intercultural dialogue and globalization has been held first in China (2003) where Asia and Europe have been exchanging policy approaches and best practices to increase better understanding on each other’s approach to language diversity and multilingualism. Three subsequent meetings were held in Paris (2005), Kuala Lumpur (2008), and Poznan (2010) with different but still related themes: Cultural

⁴Ratified by Indonesia by Presidential Decree No. 78 of July 2007. Indonesia is presently Chair of the Intergovernmental Committee on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, and will host the 6th Meeting of the IGC in Nusa Dua, Bali, from 22nd – 29th November 2011.

⁵ UNESCO 2003 Convention, Article 2

⁶ Ratified by Indonesia by Presidential Decree of October 2011

⁷ UNESCO 2005 Convention on Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expression, Introduction, Paragraph 14

⁸ UNESCO 2005 Convention, Article 6, Paragraph 2, Sub (b)

Diversity: Opportunities and Challenges – ASEM's long term plan, Cultural Diversity – Realizing the Action Plan, Heritage and the Challenges of the Present respectively.

At the closing of the *ASEM Seminar on Preserving and Promoting the Diversity of Cultural Expressions: Sharing Asian and European Experiences* (held in Hanoi, Vietnam in December 2009) ASEF Executive Director called to focus specifically on sharing experiences on language diversity between Asia and Europe. Both Asia and Europe are continents with strong language diversity and it is important to share our perspectives on policy and exchange best practices for the mutual benefit of Asian and European countries.

Taking into account of these developments, the ASEM Language Diversity Forum is going to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia in 4-5 September 2012 under the theme “*Safeguarding and Promoting Language Diversity in Asia and Europe towards Sustainable Development*”. It is an open platform for discussions between officials, decision-makers as well as representatives of civil society, active in the preservation of endangered ethnic languages from Asia and Europe to exchange experiences and points of view on questions related to the preservation of language diversity.

Due to the cross-sectoral nature of the issue, the discussion in the ASEM LDF 2012 would address the following four essential topics, as follows:

- i. Language diversity policies and issues in Asia and Europe
- ii. Exchange of best practices in safeguarding and promoting language and cultural diversity in Asia and Europe
- iii. Strategies in protecting and promoting language diversity in relation to sustainable economic development in Asia and Europe.
- iv. The role of media and ICT in safeguarding and promoting language diversity in Asia and Europe.

These topics are expected to generate in-depth discussion with a view to identify concrete policies/measures and possible cooperation among ASEM Partners.

I. Language Diversity Policies and Issues in Asia and Europe

The livelihood of languages depends on the people who speak them in a given environment and also on whether they could fulfil their functions. In this case, languages interact with each other, they compete with each other. Languages then have their ecology, i.e. living in their language environment. Language ecology may be seen from two different, but complementary, angles. On the one hand, language ecology can be seen as “the study of interactions between any given languages with its environment”⁹.

⁹ Haugen, E. 1972. *The Ecology of Language*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. p.325

The European Union and ASEAN as regional entities have their own language policies based on language ecology. In the EU context, language ecology policy aims at multilingualism and the formation of European cultural identity. The policy prepares the younger generation to feel themselves as “European citizens” while being citizens of their own country. Of course, language policy is not the only one to support the ideal of “European citizenship”. Other policies also play an important role in supporting the ideal, i.e. the establishment of European Universities, the creation of borderless member states, and the “Schengen visa” based on the treaty of Maastricht.

Whilst in ASEAN, more efforts are needed to promote the study of ASEAN languages and cultures, i.e. the establishment of ASEAN studies in the Universities or an ASEAN language development centre. Language plays an important role as an access to cultural mutual understanding among ASEAN member states and citizens. This is related to language ecology: the study of languages and their environment and the concept of languages living together. ASEAN has more than one thousand ethnic languages that need to be vitalized or revitalized. Universities or official language development agencies may be given the responsibility to carry out studies and prepare policy recommendations related to language ecology and ethnic languages (re)vitalization.

The disappearance of languages has been increasing overtime which will progressively deplete the language resources and heritage of the globe. Therefore, efforts need to be taken in different countries to arrest and reverse language loss and preserve language diversity. Despite the language situations found in Europe and Asia being fundamentally different, both areas are affected by the effects of globalization. We can therefore think of this as a bridge between the two regions and one means to start engaging in dialogue about language policy issues together. Considering this and the enormous impact that the globalization has on all aspects of human life, a language policy responses to globalization would be strategically important and useful focus for discussions.

Taking into consideration the intertwinement of the three components of language policy, language planning or management, language ideology, and language practices¹⁰, we would like to propose this workshop to address two main issues: the strategies for developing national languages *vis-à-vis* global languages and the strategies for protecting, preserving, and developing regional ethnic endangered languages.

Projected output:

- Exchange of best practices in the field of policy development for the preservation, maintenance, and development of local languages as markers of identity and also repositories of local or indigenous knowledge and values.
- Cooperation on comprehensive scientific inventory and documentation of all the languages in use. Based on this field work, it will then be possible to classify languages into a small

¹⁰ Spolsky, B. 2004. *Language Policy. Key Topics in Socio-languages*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

number of categories describing the degree of endangerment to extinction. This will allow decisions to be made about proper responses for each case. For those which are close to extinction, immediate steps can be taken to obtain as rich as possible documentation of the language and the knowledge encoded in it. For those languages which have a small number of speakers and under threat, but are capable of being revitalized, assistance can be given to the local community.

- Cooperation in the development of a national corpus. A corpus is a collection of naturally occurring texts, stored in electronic format on a computer. The texts in the corpus are usually assembled purposefully to form a representative or balanced sample of a language variety or state. It will form a primary data set to be used by investigators using a corpus languages approach¹¹.

II. Exchange of best practices in safeguarding and promoting language and cultural diversity in Asia and Europe

Much of the intangible cultural heritage and cultural diversity of both Europe and Asia depends on sustainment of language diversity as its vehicle. If language diversity disappears, being replaced by national or international languages, then much of this cultural heritage will undergo a shift in values and significance, or even disappear completely. For example, the *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppet theatre) of Java and other parts of Indonesia uses Javanese language, including classical language. This language is generally not understood by the younger generation of Indonesian people in Java, especially in the big cities. They, therefore, cannot appreciate much the shadow puppet performance. Thus we can observe a decrease in frequency of such performances, and this form of cultural heritage is thus threatened.

Safeguarding of language diversity for purely academic reasons may not be sufficient justification for governments, NGOs, communities and other stakeholders to take the necessary steps for its preservation. However, recognizing the essential role of language diversity for safeguarding of cultural heritage and diversity of cultural expression may provide additional motivation for safeguarding of language diversity. Being able to enjoy traditional performing arts and other varieties of cultural expression using local languages may also be motivation for younger generations to learn local languages.

Indonesia has experiences of safeguarding local languages related to cultural diversity. For example, the training of child puppeteers, young singers in local languages, inclusion of local languages in school curricula related to local cultural expressions, etc. Other countries, both in Asia and in Europe, certainly have their own experiences in this field.

¹¹ Baker et al. 2006. *A Glossary of Corpus Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University; Centre of Computational Linguistics. 2006. *Systematic Dictionary of Corpus Linguistics*. Kaunas, Lithuania: Centre of Computational Linguistics, Vytautas Magnus University; McEnery, T and Wilson, A. 2001. *Corpus Linguistics: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University; Sinclair, J. 1991. *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This workshop could bring together experts in the languages used in the expressions of cultural diversity of Europe and Asia. They could discuss the role of language diversity related to cultural diversity and how this language diversity might be maintained in practical terms. Participants of the workshop may present case studies to share experiences and lessons learned on but not limited to the following issues:

- (a) policy and practices in language diversity
- (b) local language documentation;
- (c) literacy in local languages;
- (d) mother language education;
- (e) policy and practices in cultural diversity
- (f) cultural content subjects at school;
- (g) oral traditions and expressions at school.

Projected output:

To exchange best practices and expertise in Asia and Europe between European and Asian experts, organizations and governments in the field of language diversity related to cultural diversity, particularly in relation to the 2003 and 2005 UNESCO Conventions (*Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions*).

III. Strategies in Protecting and Promoting Language Diversity in relation to Sustainable Economic Development in Asia and Europe

In relation to the emerging of English as a first-rank language, Crystal (2003)¹² expresses his fear of the rapid death of many minority languages across the world. In his recent book he emphasizes that at least 50 per cent of the world's 6,000 living languages will die out within the next century. The issue of language death, therefore, "should be discussed with increasing urgency because of the unprecedented rate at which indigenous languages are being lost, especially in North America, Brazil, Australia, Indonesia and parts of Africa"¹³.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, it has been recognized that the fundamental cause for language diversity decline is economic growth and development. According to De Grauwe (2006), for the purpose of international trade, countries that have a common language tend to trade more than those that are multilingual. In other words, the use of the same language will enhance economic growth and development because people can communicate better. In this regard, Crystal emphasised that English must not replace a national dialect, but should only serve as supplement. People can use both languages as they can continue to express their national identity as well as their international intelligibility.

¹² Crystal, D. 2003. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: CUP.

¹³ *Ibid*

The discussion under this workshop topic may address case studies of the socio-economic conditions of a multilingual community, the future of language diversity and the world's economic growth, language diversity and creative economy, and minority language education programs for overseas students.

Projected output:

- To exchange best practices in enhancing economic growth in multilingual countries.
- To develop a strategy in revitalizing endangered languages through indigenous cultural products.
- To map creative and potential heritage in multilingual communities
- To find a positive correlation between societal multilingualism and industrial creativity
- To document best practices in providing minority language education programs for overseas students.
- (etc)

IV. The role of media and ICT in safeguarding and promoting language diversity in Asia and Europe

Media and other ICT based media have increased people-to-people interaction as well as communication among societies in a globalized world. Taking into consideration of this development, there is a need to explore ways and best practices to maximize the role of the media and ICT in the efforts to safeguard and promote language diversity in Asia and Europe. This topic may focus on the establishment of joint ICT initiatives to safeguard and promote language diversity.

Maximizing the media and ICT to document elements of languages, especially the endangered ones, become priorities. Many tools can be utilised to record, share, and publicize linguistic findings as well as knowledge attached in regional languages. As we know, much knowledge is still hidden behind local genius and local wisdom. Therefore, media and ICT play the significant role to prevent knowledge loss caused by language loss, which can be done by widening the access to those in remote areas. It is not impossible since almost all people nowadays have access to media and can easily share their local based uniqueness with others.

Taking note the arguments above, the said joint initiatives, then, may range from creating linguistic software to organizing events related to safeguarding and promoting effort. Those require active participations from academicians, media and ICT practitioners, as well as other stake holders in the field of language diversity.

Projected output:

- To exchange best practices in utilising media and ICT as means of preserving language diversity in globalization era
- To develop IT based database containing information of language diversity in a specific region
- To share ideas on language mapping software, either offline or online based, describing the language status in each region, whether it is nearly extinct, potentially endangered, not endangered, etc.
- To document the variants of language diversity in multilingual communities
- To revitalize vocabularies of languages come closer to extinction
- To maximize the media as instruments of language promotion

Conclusion

Language policies are about cultural opportunities and preferences. They are part of broader moral and political visions and must be interpreted accordingly. An understanding of relationship between language policies and natural cultural identities will help us to appreciate the complete interactions among these forces.

The ASEM Language Diversity Forum 2012 is expected to produce a recommendation for action plans on language diversity in Asia and Europe. This recommendation would further be submitted to the 5th ASEM Culture Ministers Meeting in September 2012 and 4th ASEM Education Ministers Meeting in 2013

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