Language and dialect in Italy and the wider Europe in the context of the UNESCO *Atlas*

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Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to join this conference on the linguistic situation of the Veneto Region. As the editor of the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, which is now in its third edition, I would like to try and put the Veneto Region into a European context, and ultimately a world context.

The UNESCO *Atlas* grew out of the concept of the «Red Book», which originally was meant to provide a world-wide alert to the loss of biological diversity. By the early Nineteen-nineties, linguists and anthropologists were beginning to notice a parallel between the losses sustained by nature and the losses sustained by human culture. Being an organisation concerned with both science and culture, it naturally fell to UNESCO to take up the call to safeguard cultural as well as biological diversity. The first two editions of this *Atlas*, in 1996 and 2001, were issued in book form, with an accompanying set of maps, but they did not cover the whole world. They only aimed to provide data about some representative areas of the world where the threat to the smaller indigenous languages was most acute.

The first edition, published in 1996, under the general editorship of Stephen Wurm, Professor at the Australia National University, listed 600 languages which were considered endangered, with 53 pages of text and 12 maps. The second edition, in 2001, was also edited by Professor Wurm, completed just before he died. For both of these editions, he gathered around him an international team of experts, who described the regional situations in texts to accompany each map, and plotted the positions of the endangered languages using a colour-coded system which we still use, basically, in this third edition, and which I will explain shortly. In the second edition the number of languages listed was increased to 800, and there were 90 pages of text and 14 maps. But it was still not complete and comprehensive.

Thanks to some generous funding from the Government of Norway, it was possible to expand the project in several ways for this edition. Firstly,

it's appearing for the first time in two forms: a digital, on-line edition that is accessible through the unesco web-site, and a printed edition. The digital version was launched in Paris in February 2009, to coincide with «International Mother Tongue Day». The print version appeared a year later, as well as the printed Spanish and French versions.

One important advantage is that now that it is accessible to all users, any faults or errors of omission or commission can be rectified in the future.

The scope of the *Atlas* is now greatly extended, to include 2.500 languages – which is probably more than a third of all the languages in the world. Since languages are constantly dying at the rate of at least one every few weeks, naturally we had to decide to include some recently extinct ones among these, so approximately 230 of the languages included have been extinct since 1950; in other words, the lifetime of UNESCO, or two generations of language-losers.

The mapping itself has changed profoundly since the last edition. Previously the printed maps were simply flat outline maps in a single colour, drawn to the appropriate scale for the region being shown but with no topographical detail and few indicators of towns or other landmarks. The new maps are based on Google technology. It is still not overloaded with geographical detail, because it is important not to distract the user from the seeking the location of a language. But the amount of topographical detail, the opportunity to zoom in and out of different scales, all help the user to easily get their bearings.

If you look at a typical page of the *Atlas*, and select a language by clicking on its symbol, you will see the amount of data that is available about each individual language: its main name, its alternative names if any, its iso code – let me pause here and explain that the ISO 639 code is a single three-letter code assigned to each language in the world that is recognised as a separate language. «Recognised as a separate language» is an important criterion here, because, on the one hand, one language may have many names, which might also refer to dialects of it; and on the other hand, several languages might share one name. A code will distinguish its separate identity. These codes were not devised by us; they are the property of the International Standards Organisation, but they're most often associated with the *Ethnologue* listing of all the world's known languages, which is regularly brought up to date by its publisher, the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Other details shown here are numbers of speakers, relevant policies and projects, and sources of information, as well, of course, as the geographical co-ordinates. What it does not show is affiliation within a language family. We do have that information, but we feel that it is best explained in the text, as in some

cases it may involve quite complex hierarchies that cannot easily be shown in a confined space.

And of course what is very important is that users have a chance to give their feedback. Some of this feedback will lead to changes in the information provided about the languages in the *Atlas*.

For this project, the world was divided up into regions, more or less continental in scope, and the editors for each section worked on the maps and provided the text. The project had a web editor in Paris at UNESCO headquarters, the very hard-working Hugues Sicard, who allowed password access to each editor to plot the position of each language on their own map, and provide the accompanying information. The languages were then indexed and grouped by country in alphabetical order, so that the user can scroll down a list for each country to locate a particular language. The information was checked against the ISO codes – and in some cases our regional experts had to disagree with the codes given, either because they applied too widely to a group of separate languages or too narrowly to misidentified languages or dialects, so we are also contributing corrections to the official code list. New codes are needed in some cases; some old codes need to be reassigned.

Another important point about the mapping of languages in this Atlas is that languages are shown by points, not by polygons. Each language point is of a single standard size. The reason is obvious – very small points could easily be lost; very large points, measured by numbers of speakers, would crowd out the smaller points. Also, since we are not mapping stable or unthreatened languages at all, we cannot use polygons – shapes representing the actual area where a language is spoken – because they would border onto nothing. They would raise more questions than they would answer. So therefore we faced the challenge of placing the standard point in the most central location for each language. If the speakers are scattered over a wide area, this presents a further problem, and if there are other languages in between, naturally we do have to use several points. But we have tried to be sparing with these. Such a policy has to be applied judiciously if the speakers are nomadic, for instance – in such a case all we can do is provide a minimum number of representative points.

You will see the difference between the mapping methods if you compare a page of the unesco *Atlas* with a page from the Routledge *Atlas of the World's Languages*, which uses polygons, and treats all languages equally, so that the only blank spaces show uninhabited places. For illustration, let us compare the two different treatments of Italy.

These points themselves, you will notice, are in a range of colours, and these colours indicate the degree of endangerment. The degrees are described on one of the web pages: «Safe», «Vulnerable», «Definitely

endangered », « Severely endangered », « Critically endangered », « Extinct ». There has been much discussion about these terms, and they have changed slightly since the last edition. What is most controversial is the last term, « Extinct ». There are of course languages whose last native speaker has died, maybe even several generations ago, and yet there are second-language speakers who are consciously reviving the language, as they claim it as part of their ancestry. We are adding a special category for « revived » or « revitalised » languages.

Each map and section of accompanying text in all three editions was the work of an acknowledged specialist on the languages of the region, and I was appointed as general editor to co-ordinate the task. And in all three editions, we have graded each language with a colour-code according to the level of danger it faces; and they are these:

« Safe » if the language is spoken by all generations. The intergenerational transmission of the language is uninterrupted. (Therefore such languages are not found in the *Atlas*).

« Stable yet threatened » if a language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken transmission, although multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant languages has taken over certain contexts. (Such languages are not usually in the *Atlas*, but potentially they will be in the future, and we specialists must watch them).

« Vulnerable » if most children or families of a particular community speak their parental language as a first language, even if only in the home.

« Definitely endangered » if the language is no longer learned as the mother tongue or taught in the home. The youngest speakers are of the parental generation.

« Severely endangered » if the language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; the parent generation may still understand it but will not pass it on to their children.

« Critically endangered » if the youngest speakers are of the greatgrandparents' generation, and the language is not used every day. These older people may only partially remember it and have no partners for communication.

« Extinct » if no-one speaks or remembers the language. We editors decided to include such languages if they have been spoken in the past sixty years, approximately the lifetime of UNESCO itself. Of all the categories, we have found that this is the most controversial.

Now, for this third edition, which first appeared in 2009, not only was the printed version expanded to cover the entire world (as you will see from the map that is on display here), but UNESCO created an on-line version of the atlas as well, so that any user with access to a computer may look at the language situation in a particular country, or search for a par-

ticular language, or a particular class of languages, as they wish. Not only that, but users have the opportunity to provide feedback to the editors, if they find some data that is wrong, or that some important language is omitted. Since this latest edition appeared, my team of editors have been receiving a steady stream of comments, queries and suggestions from users – and many of these have come from Italian users, including people with an interest in the Veneto region. In fact, I must tell you that most of the interested feedback from users has been concerned with languages of Europe. I don't know the reason for this greater interest in Europe, but perhaps there is greater access to computers in Europe than in other continents; or it may be that there is a greater level of education about linguistics in Europe. But what I think is an important reason, possibly the main reason, is that our editor for Europe has tried to be as sensitive as possible to the claims of separate language status for many language varieties which might be called «dialects» on other continents.

And so, if we take a linguistic tour of Western Europe on our UNESCO maps, we find many varieties and sub-varieties in France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Now, inevitably, we come to the question of Language versus Dialect. This is a terribly complex question and I will not pretend that there are easy solutions, if we go on the general principle that we include only languages, not dialects, in the *Atlas*. And it is particularly relevant to a country like Italy, where regional varieties have gone on living their own healthy lives long after the creation of a national written standard.

Specifically, the languages which we have listed as «Endangered» in Italy, to a greater or lesser degree, are Lombard, Piedmontese, Ligurian, Emilian-Romagnol, Molise Croatian, Faetar, «South Italian», Griko, Arbereshe (Albanian) and Gardiol on the mainland, Gallo-Sicilian and Sicilian in Sicily, and Gallurese, Logudorese, Algherese Catalan and Campidanese in Sardinia. So we are dividing up the language varieties differently, and more finely, than the divisions you find in the polygons of the Routledge *Atlas of the world's languages*. The issue of naming the tongues or language varieties of Italy is more fluid and varied even than in France, more than in Germany, and certainly more than in Spain. (I am deliberately avoiding the categorical terms «language» and «dialect» here).

Here in the setting of Venice, we are surrounded with the reminders of the glorious history of the Veneto region. As we are hearing from other speakers, it terms of linguistic distinctiveness it also has a very long history. And also of the good health of the language. You will notice what has been included and what has been omitted from the map of Italy in our UNESCO *Atlas*.

One characteristic of the situation in Italy is that official recognition of the regional language varieties has not been granted, but the languages

are thriving anyway, certainly as a spoken medium, and in some cases as a written medium as well.

Why are some languages of Italy thriving and why are some declining? That is one of the things I hope to learn by being here with you. But I can maybe contrast the Veneto and Italian situation with other countries: the United Kingdom, where I have come from today, where the surviving Celtic languages exist on the fringes in a perilous state, except for Welsh, which received state support in time to reverse its decline and it is now thriving. Or I could contrast Italy with my homeland Australia. Even the Italian language in Australia, as a community language, is in a healthier state than *any* of Australia's indigenous languages. And in Brazil, the Venetian language is also thriving as a community language better than any indigenous language of Brazil.

The confusion for outsiders about the status of Venetian as a language is probably due not just to the lack of official recognition by the Italian state, but also by the Venetian dialect of Italian that is spoken here as well. A long tradition of literacy, since the early days of printing, is one of the factors that have kept the Venetian language healthy and alive.

This *Atlas* is just one way of monitoring the situation for the world's threatened languages. We're celebrating a rich storehouse of human culture here, some of which is under threat of extinction, and I would urge you too, to contribute any feedback you would like to present to the *Atlas* if you feel you have something to add, amend or correct, and ensure that you bring that fragile diversity represented in this country to the world's attention. Thank you.

ABSTRACT   After a brief chronicle concerning the history of the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* edited by UNESCO and its first volume editions (1996, 2001), Moseley lingers over the layout and the functioning of the third edition, in its digital version (2009). Particular attention is dedicated to the filing of «degree of endangerment» of languages of the world (six different degrees, starting form «Safe» up to «Extinct»), and to the linguistic situation of contemporary Italy.