

Heading A

If half of the 6,000 languages in the world were to disappear within the next 100 years, many people would consider it to be a great loss in respect of the linguistic diversity and cultural heritage of the human race; there are however those that disagree and feel that it might benefit the world to have a more homogeneous linguistic make-up. By looking at declarations of linguistic rights, the aim is to ascertain what the United Nation's stance should be on this debate. The more specific arguments of whether language extinction is problematic or not will then be discussed.

Heading B

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) was a significant move in international law to a more promotion-orientated perspective on language rights (May, 2001). May, drawing on the work of Klass, suggests that there are two broad approaches to language rights in international law: tolerance-orientated rights and promotion-orientated rights. While tolerance- orientated rights are primarily concerned with the right to preserving people's language in the private sphere, promotion-related rights are more concerned with minority languages' usage and recognition in the public sphere (May, 2001). It can safely be assumed that people's language rights in the private sphere is included and subsumed with promotion-related rights, for if a language is to be promoted, it has to not only be tolerated, but also accepted. This would then suggest that the UN's position was that the maintenance of minority languages and thus linguistic diversity was beneficial.

Heading C

In its preamble the 1992 UN Declaration acknowledges that the promotion and protection of the rights of minority group members can contribute to, rather than subtract from, the political and social stability of a state (May, 2001) and also that the UN plays, or at least should play, an important role in the protection of minorities. May (2001) points out that this UN Declaration is a recommendation and not a binding covenant; individual nations have the option of whether to comply with its precepts. For example in the United States there are 28 states with 'English Only' laws; English must be used within the public domain. In these states in the most powerful nation in the world today promotion-orientated rights, as recommended by the Declaration, are not allowed. This recommendatory status therefore suggests that while the UN believes minority language preservation to be beneficial, it does not consider it to be important enough to make its recommendations compulsory. However, May (2001) points out that the majority of international law is discretionary and so the recommendations may well just be following legal precedent. This should not detract from the fact that this piece of international law is making steps towards the promotion of minority languages. May (2001) notes that due to the Declaration's voluntary nature the positive general recommendations of minority language rights in the private and public spheres are qualified considerably in the specific articles regarding minority languages.

Heading D

The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) refines many of the language rights of minority speakers. It argues that explicit legal guarantees should be

put in place for the linguistic rights of individuals, groups and communities (May, 2001). Within the declaration there is a change to focusing on the language community, as defined by a society historically established in a territorial space, rather than nation state to ensure a wider coverage for more minority groups (Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, 1996). An example of where this distinction would have an effect is in the Basque region of Spain: the Basque community was historically linked to a particular area of Spain and until the fall of Franco this area was not recognised by the Spanish government, in the terms of this declaration the Basque community would always have had linguistic rights. The Declaration also stresses the importance of the right to use your own language, not dependent on status, so an asylum seeker should have the right to a translator for example.

Heading E

In a presentation to the World Congress on Language Policies in 2002, Skutnabb-Kangas argues very strongly against the extinction of languages in the world. She claims that there is a paradox in that languages are an important part of the heritage of humanity yet we ourselves are killing them off. In Skutnabb-Kangas' (2002) view, while there is much positive rhetoric about the preservation of the world's languages, the declarations discussed above can be presumed to be included within this, homogenising linguistic efforts seem to be gaining strength. One nation which in recent times has made huge steps towards promotion-orientated language rights and so diverging from Skutnabb-Kangas' claims is New Zealand. Since the mid- 1980s the Maori language has become an official language with continuously increasing numbers of pupils being educated in bilingual schools. Unfortunately, New Zealand appears to be one of the rare exceptions unlike other native English speaking countries like America and Australia, with many African nations implementing immersion models in education for non-African languages, all seemingly converging with Skutnabb-Kangas' claims.

Heading F

Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) makes an analogy between the importance of cultural diversity in humans and biodiversity in nature and makes strong claims that cultural diversity is being rapidly killed off through language murder. In Australia, at least 150 aboriginal languages and their associative cultures have disappeared since 1788 which is an incredibly rapid rate of extinction. Skutnabb-Kangas' argues that even if speakers seem to be voluntarily leaving their languages, languages do not commit suicide; they are murdered through linguistic and cultural genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002). This is the main thrust of Skutnabb-Kangas' concerns; with a language disappearance (or murder in her terms) a culture also disappears. She quotes Wurm, who says that 'each language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex... with the death and disappearance of such a language, an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view is lost forever' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002: 2). In this sense it seems that the point being made is that without diversity in language we would lose a great deal more than we would gain. While Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) is extremely radical in her description, her concerns must be shared to some extent by the UN and other such organisations, otherwise they would not create declarations like the two discussed earlier. Yet their concerns are certainly nowhere near as serious for their declarations are only recommendations, although this is in part due to the problems of international law as noted by May (2001) and mentioned earlier; it normally has an amount of autonomy for individual states as a pre-requisite.

Heading G

In Skutnabb-Kangas' (2002) view it is 'optimistic realistic' linguists that predict that half of today's languages may have disappeared in 100 years, while 'pessimistic but realistic' linguists predict that there may be as few as 10% of today's languages remaining in a hundred years. Looking at the fact that in just over two hundred years in one country (Australia) over 150 languages have disappeared makes this worldwide prediction seem less unrealistic. Skutnabb-Kangas takes the view that the languages that disappear will have been murdered by 'killer languages' which she describes as languages that are learned subtractively (at the cost of the mother tongue) rather than additively (supplementary to the mother tongue). It is these 'killer languages' that are seriously threatening the linguistic diversity of the world and English is the world's most significant of these (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002). Australia could again be shown to back up the claim that English is the most significant of the 'killer languages', with so many languages dying out in such a short period of time it has to be assumed that much of this was due to the subtractive learning of English.

Heading H

While Skutnabb-Kangas' terminology is extreme, her points are seemingly backed up by the figures'. Approximately half the world's population speaks one of the top ten languages (in terms of numbers of speakers), while these top ten 'killer languages' represent only 0.10-0.15% of the world's languages. 95% of the world's languages have fewer than 1 million native users and more shockingly, one quarter of languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers. Two countries, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia together have one quarter of the world's languages with over 850 and approximately 670 respectively (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002).

Heading I

The differences in the roles that languages play, leads many people to believe that those that do not fulfil a wide range of functions are incapable of doing so, that they are not good enough (Harlow, 1998). This kind of view is often demonstrated where minority languages are spoken alongside a major language. Harlow (1998) mentions the case of New Zealand, which was discussed above as an example of a nation introducing a promotion- orientated perspective for minority languages. Harlow comments that with the introduction of the new promotional initiatives it has been possible to observe the reaction that the Maori language is not a good enough language to be used in the public sphere; that it is not capable of fulfilling all the same functions as the English language. The misconception is often that because there has been no need previously to discuss nuclear physics in Maori that it could never be done, due to some inherent fault in the Maori language itself (Harlow, 1998). It is these kinds of attitudes that give rise to the notions, which Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) is vehemently against, that it does not matter if many of today's languages disappear.

Heading J

Hand-in-hand with the concept that it does not matter if many languages were to disappear is the notion that the supremacy of English in the European Union, or increasing homogeneity as Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) might refer to it, is beneficial in an economic sense. In 2001 the European Commissioner Neil Kinnock proposed that

the commission's translation budget be cut so that the EC's workings would be more streamlined (BBC News Online, 2001). The European Union has 11 official languages and the European Commission, 3 working languages (English, French and German). It was argued against these proposals that they would lead to an increasing unilingualism in European institutions, favouring English. The argument for the proposal was that it would make more efficient use of resources. It is these kinds of arguments that increase the homogeneity of language in the world, thus leading to language losses (BBC News Online, 2001). These proposals, from within a European-wide organisation seemingly conflict with the declarations discussed earlier; if minority languages are worth protecting and promoting, then that policy should provide that no one language takes supremacy. In this instance it seems that factors of economics are taking precedent over social and cultural factors. In the French press EU officials were accused of wanting to relegate national languages to the status of dialects (BBC News Online, 2001). While the French press were perhaps being sensationalist in these claims, it does not alter the fact that it is not only minority languages that are being pushed out by the 'killer languages', but that majority national languages are also feeling homogenising pressure from English.

Heading K

It seems that the United Nations are concerned to some extent that minority languages will die out, yet are unwilling to take a positive role in ensuring that this does not occur, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2002) would suggest is necessary. The reasons for maintaining the linguistic diversity of the world are social and cultural. The grounds on which arguments that favour language homogeneity appear to be based are economical (in the case of the EU) or prejudiced against minority languages, as Harlow (1998) claims.

Heading L

BBC News Online (2001) *EU translation plan provokes protest*

Harlow, R. (1998) 'Some languages are just not good enough' in *Language Myths* (eds. Bauer, L and Trudgill, P.) London: Penguin

May, S. (2001) *Language and minority rights: ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of language* London: Longman

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2002) *Language Policies and Education: The Roles of Education in Destroying or Supporting the World's Linguistic Diversity*. World Congress on Language Policies, Barcelona, 16-20 April.

United Nations (1992) *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*

Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996)