

The Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

is pleased to host a lecture by

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on

The ecolinguistic relationship between biodiversity and linguistic diversity – is linguistic homogenisation ruining the planet?

Time: 3 p.m. Tuesday, 1 September 2009

Place: Budapest VI. Benczúr u. 33.

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Abstract

The ecolinguistic relationship between linguistic diversity (LD) and biodiversity is a complex fairly recent area of research. There are serious threats to both types of diversity, and LD is disappearing relatively much faster than biodiversity. According to pessimistic but realistic estimates, 90 to 95% of today's spoken languages may be very seriously endangered or extinct by the year 2100 (Krauss, Maffi & Yamamoto 2004). If this scenario is not counteracted strongly and immediately, the estimate could also be that most languages to go would be Indigenous, and most of the world's Indigenous languages would no longer be learned by children in 2100, or they would be completely extinct. The maintenance of diversity is counteracted by the increasing dominance of English (Phillipson 2008, 2009) and other killer languages. These are often learned subtractively, at the cost of the mother tongues (Benson 2009, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, 2009), instead of additively, in addition to mother tongues. Schools participate, through assimilationist genocidal education, in processes of linguistic capital dispossession (Harvey 2005, Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, in press), and reproduction of poverty (Sen 1985, Misra & Mohanty 2000, Mohanty 2000, Mohanty & Minati 2007, 2009, Heugh 2009).

Linguistic and cultural diversity on the one hand and biodiversity on the other hand are correlated – where one type is high, the other one tends to be too, and vice versa (Harmon 1995, 2002). New research suggests mounting evidence for the hypothesis that the relationship might also be causal: the two types of diversities seem to mutually enforce and support each other. If the long-lasting co-evolution which people have had with their environments for millions of years is suddenly disrupted, without nature (and people) getting enough time to adjust and adapt, we are also seriously undermining our chances of human life on earth (see www.terralingua.org, Terralingua's web-site and references to Maffi). This is because much of the knowledge about how to maintain the world's biodiversity is encoded in the small Indigenous and local languages. With the disappearance of the languages, this knowledge (which is often more accurate and sophisticated than “western” “scientific” knowledge, see ICSU 2002) will also disappear. The linguistic homogenisation may thus be destroying the prerequisites for human life on earth.

Education and mass media are the most important *direct* causal factors in the disappearance of languages; structural political factors are behind them. The education of Indigenous and minority children in most countries today violates the right to education (Magga et al., 2005). It can sociologically and educationally be termed genocide, according to the UN Genocide Convention; legally, it can be seen as a crime against humanity (Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008, Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, in press). All references mentioned can be found in

<http://www.tove-skutnabb-kangas.org/en/Tove-Skutnabb-Kangas-Bibliography.html>

An earlier paper on Linguistic Human Rights in Education by Skutnabb-Kangas can be downloaded from <http://www.arts.u-szeged.hu/finnugor/konferencia-eng.html>