

# Safeguarding language as intangible cultural heritage

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## ABSTRACT

The UK currently lacks a national framework for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH). ICH represents 'living cultural expressions and practices, which are recognised by communities as distinct aspects of identity' (Alivizatou-Barakou et al. 2017, 129). We argue that language, including dialects, accents and lexicons of UK communities, must be included within approaches which aim to safeguard ICH. As a 'repository' (Bialostocka 2017) of community practices, language is central to individual and shared identities and feelings of 'belonging' (Sarma 2015). This paper challenges perceptions that the UK has no ICH (see Waterton and Smith 2009) through a case study of 'pit talk' in the East Midlands. It draws on approaches

being taken on local or regional levels to preserve and revitalise language heritage (e.g. Howell 2013; ICH Scotland n.d.). We explore the potential benefits, disadvantages and limitations of the UK ratifying UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003. Although we argue that this would be a positive step towards protecting ICH in the UK, we propose that a UK-wide framework, which places community needs at its heart, is key to safeguarding language heritage for future generations.

## Keywords

dialect, pit talk, UNESCO, lexicon

## Introduction

Despite its central importance to culture and identities, language is rarely included in state-sponsored measures intended to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (ICH). In this article, we explore contemporary approaches to ICH and UNESCO's conceptualisation of language as a 'vehicle' of ICH as enacted through UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003 ('the UNESCO Convention'). Consideration is given to the reasons for including language within measures

intended to safeguard ICH, before we examine the status of language heritage in the UK. Through a case study of 'pit talk' (Braber 2022), we illustrate some of the richness of the UK's language heritage to underline the applicability of language as ICH in Western cultures. Finally, we argue that the UK, which is not a signatory of the UNESCO Convention, ought to re-examine its position and give serious consideration to signing the UNESCO Convention and/or adopting a more robust approach which would be beneficial to safeguarding language as ICH.

## Background

The historical development of the concept and definition of ICH and the shift away from viewing heritage as solely tangible, including the ratification of the UNESCO Convention, has been well documented, and we do not propose to revisit this in the present article. Blake (2020), for example, provides a thorough and recent discussion of 'the inception to young adulthood' of the UNESCO Convention. Most notably, the UNESCO Convention represented what Blake has referred to as a 'recalibration' of our understanding of the concept of 'heritage' and the 'paradigm' for its protection. Indeed, Munjeri (2009, 131) considers that the UNESCO Convention marked a turning point in the approach to heritage encapsulated in international instruments, recognising the status of ICH and elevating the status of intangible heritage, which some had argued was seen as the 'poor relation of culture'. This occurred in an international context which increasingly recognised the need for sustainable development and the preservation of global cultural diversity (Blake 2020, 3–4).

Recent research and practices to safeguard<sup>1</sup> ICH have largely been driven by an increasing awareness of the need to challenge what Smith (2006) has referred to as Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD). AHD represents the dominant hegemonic, usually Western (and especially Western European) discourse about heritage, which 'acts to constitute the way we think, talk and write about heritage' (Smith 2006, 11) and attempts to render the intangible tangible. Harrison and Linkman (2010) have argued that we need to develop skills to allow us to analyse heritage and its role within social contexts. Sensitivity to safeguarding ICH reflects a growing awareness of the impact of globalisation on a whole host of minority and otherwise non-dominant cultures and traditions.

According to Alivizatou-Barakou and others (2017, 129), ICH represents 'living cultural expressions and practices, which are recognised by communities as distinct aspects of identity' (see also e.g. Akagawa 2015). The importance of ICH to identities is well established, and countries such as Japan and Korea (through programmes such as Living National Treasures) have attempted to 'create mechanisms and institutions that would record, sustain and perpetuate' practices that are threatened by economic trends in the West and might otherwise lead 'to the abandonment of traditional ways of life and ceremonies and disrupt the local sense of continuity and identity' (Alivizatou 2012, 9). The UNESCO Convention

promotes an international approach to accepting culture and traditions as aspects of heritage and recognising the roles of communities, especially Indigenous communities, in safeguarding ICH and 'helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity' (UNESCO 2003). UNESCO (2011) also acknowledges that the importance of ICH is not the cultural manifestation itself, but the wealth of knowledge and skills transmitted through generations. (For a fuller discussion of the development of international measures to safeguard ICH, see e.g. Ahmad 2006). Furthermore, UNESCO stresses in the Convention the importance of communities as bearers of traditional or cultural expression. As such, all safeguarding actions must be community led (WSP 2020, 9). To allow for safeguarding, UNESCO put in place a Representative List of the ICH of Humanity, which simultaneously documents ICH, recognises its status and encourages states to take further action to preserve and revitalise it.

Alivizatou (2012, 9) has commented that UNESCO was instrumental in ensuring the prominence of ICH in the global setting and that its plans and programmes aimed at safeguarding this heritage have reached around the world and ensured it is seen as a universal aspect of humanity, although implementation is often highly localised (see Berger, Dicks and Fontaine 2020, 325). However, protecting ICH is particularly difficult, as it is not 'owned' in the same way that buildings and monuments can be more easily rebuilt or preserved (Graham and Howard 2008, 4). Furthermore, the UK has not ratified the UNESCO Convention nor have, at the time of writing, Australia, Canada, Liechtenstein, the US, Niue, New Zealand, Russia, San Marino, Sierra Leone and South Africa. However, the issue of ratification has been raised by Members of the UK's Houses of Commons and Lords to the UK government and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). There have been at least 12 written questions on the matter since 2015. In response to a written question answered in the House of Lords on 15 June 2020, Baroness Barran, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for DCMS, stated that 'we have not seen any compelling business case for ratifying the UNESCO Convention, nor is it clear that the benefits of doing so would outweigh the costs' (UK Parliament, UIN HL5059, 15 June 2020). However, her latest response, more hopefully, stated that the government was 'exploring the merits' of ratification (UK Parliament, UIN HL33, 11 May 2021).

In the light of this UK government interest in exploring

ratification, we now turn to consider the importance of safeguarding language heritage and how the UNESCO Convention might, at least partially, help achieve this.

## Why safeguard language heritage?

Language heritage plays a crucial role in individual and community identities, as well as in feelings of belonging and well-being, yet it lacks structured, systematic frameworks to ensure that it is safeguarded and revitalised for future generations. Researchers agree that languages and identities are inextricably linked, and Sarma (2015, 62) quotes UNESCO in stating that language 'carries an individual's or a community's identity and mediates value systems, social codes, world views and the sense of belonging'. Harrison (2010, 9) observes that, 'language is an important aspect of who we understand ourselves to be, and it is learned and passed from adult to child, from generation to generation'. He argues that intangible practices of heritage are as significant as the physical objects and buildings that are normally considered heritage in helping us understand who we are, and he draws attention to the need for communities, researchers and practitioners to consider ways language can be recognised as such. Other researchers recognise the role of language in encapsulating local heritage and cultures. Bialostocka (2017, 18) argues that language represents 'living heritage', as a 'repository and an organic inventory system [...] contained in the linguistic interactions of the people who produce it'. Nic Craith (2010, 54) similarly portrays traditional languages as 'reservoirs' which collect Indigenous knowledge, particularly of ecology and environment, where 'modernity' has yet to catch up.

There can be serious consequences associated with rupturing individual and community feelings of belonging. Gibson et al. (2021) investigated the significance of language as a cultural practice among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Queensland, Australia. They found that, 'within remote and regional areas, higher levels of community language use was associated with 26% lower suicide rates', indicating that 'cultural factors may be protective' in First People populations that are at risk of suffering transgenerational harms stemming from historical injustices and discrimination (Gibson et al. 2021, 1). Although Gibson et al.'s research concerned communities disadvantaged by colonisation, whose experience arguably differs from many communities in the UK, it suggests that engagement with aspects of cultural

practices and feelings of belonging to a cultural group may have a considerable positive impact on well-being.

Nevertheless, concepts of language (and cultural) loss are widespread, and Berliner (2013, 71) has referred to 'discourses of the vanishing' and has focused on the languages which are being lost every year throughout the world. Although Berliner suggests that language nostalgia comes mainly from outside communities, researchers have supported the notion that disappearing languages can negatively impact communities. For example, Sarma (2015, 63) cites Crystal who commented that 'the death of a language inevitably means the permanent loss of oral traditions and expressions' and stated that linguistic vitality is essential for cultural diversity. Smeets (2004, 157) affirms that local groups and communities need assistance from local or national authorities to help preserve their languages which are under threat as a result of globalisation (160), and in the next section, we consider the extent to which the UNESCO Convention might offer this assistance to ICH and language heritage in particular.

## The UNESCO Convention

The UNESCO Convention defines ICH in Article 2(1) to include:

practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. (UNESCO Convention, Art.2(1))

Article 2(2)(a) recognises 'oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage' as one domain in which ICH is manifested, and Article 2(3) includes documentation to support languages. We will return to this approach to language after first considering UNESCO's approach to ICH more broadly.

Although instances of ICH are inventoried on a series of registers, UNESCO positions ICH as something which is 'constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history' (Article 2(1)). Logan (2008) comments that UNESCO encourages local-level initiatives from the bottom up to safeguard ICH as well as the top-

down approach of the UNESCO registers (see Kral, Green and Ellis (2019) and Rowan (2017) for examples of bottom-up initiatives to safeguard Indigenous languages in Australia and the Nubian Nile respectively). Top-down approaches without public engagement, which lack community involvement in determining what becomes part of public memory, can be less effective. For example, van Eijnatten and de Nood (2018) have illustrated how essential it is that museums consider their audiences to ensure understanding and engagement, 'since the making of public meaning and memory is so central to the way museums operate, it is essential for them to seek new ways of interacting with the publics they serve' (2018, 95). Not doing so can lead to disconnection between visitors and heritage.

However, the UNESCO approach is limited in several ways. Firstly, it brings a global, standard method for safeguarding local traditions. Alivizatou (2012) has pointed out the paradox of an international organisation establishing criteria, guidelines and standards that are implemented across the world in totally different cultural settings. She has questioned strategies which involve 'local, site-specific and community-related expressions' being expected to 'meet the same global and vague criteria in the name of cultural diversity and anti-standardisation' (Alivizatou 2012, 10). Coşkun (2019) has also suggested that the UNESCO Convention might paradoxically facilitate standardisation:

Despite the fact that UNESCO policies aim to tame the far-reaching impacts of globalization (Bortolotto 2012; Turtinen 2000), by way of producing a global norm, it paradoxically enables the very process to penetrate into the most peripheral locations where the impacts of globalizations would otherwise have the least foot-hold. (Coşkun 2019, 228)

Similarly, in listing ICH on the UNESCO register, states are exposing cultural practices to the world stage, potentially triggering them to crystallise over time or otherwise adapt to suit tourists and other observers rather than those to whom they belong. Berliner (2013, 76) has stated that UNESCO may actually transform culture through its efforts to preserve it, a process he names as 'UNESCOization'. Coşkun (2019, 220) has added that 'safeguarding of ICH as part of living cultures is not only redundant, but simply not feasible without introducing irreversible changes to local cultural expressions'. As

language is always undergoing change, this may not be of as much concern as to other cultural practices.

Secondly, researchers such as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) and Kockel (2007) have argued that the inventory-style list of ICH produced by the UNESCO Convention creates a metacultural, rather than cultural, outcome, and it renders living traditions into static forms frozen in the past, which Leimbruger (2010) refers to as 'museumification'. Coşkun (2019, 228) has added that such heritage lists actually endanger the most peripheral locations, where otherwise globalisation would have the least foothold. Beyond the UNESCO Convention, Alivizatou (2012) has indicated concerns about US-dominated cultural homogenisation and the threat this poses to global cultural diversity. Nic Craith, Kockel and Lloyd (2019) similarly view globalisation and standardisation, together with tourism and migration, as threats to ICH. As such, it is important to think of sensitive, appropriate ways language can be approached as heritage.

The UNESCO Convention seeks to build new machinery around safeguarding ICH, establishing processes and tools for 'national governments to proclaim the richness of their cultural heritage', rather than focus on 'the culture bearers themselves' (James Early cited in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 56). While preserving heritage, it must crucially be kept alive and allowed to change and adapt over time.

Thirdly, the UNESCO Convention only safeguards language to the extent that it is a 'vehicle' for the transmission of aspects of culture including traditions, skills and crafts (see e.g. Smeets 2004); language is not captured, nor is it treated as a valuable dimension of heritage to be valued in and of itself (Nic Craith, Kockel and Lloyd 2019, 121). Ubertazzi (2020) documents some of the compromises made in the UNESCO Convention that explain why language was not included specifically, noting in particular that minority languages are fraught with political sensitivities, particularly around the relationships between Indigenous, official and minority languages. The UNESCO approach reflects 'long-standing resistance of States to any external interference in national cultural policies and the codification of protection for intangible heritage, especially languages, at the international level' (Vrdoljak 2014, 10). Thus, the UNESCO Convention focuses on oral traditions and expressions themselves and their performance in public, which provide the 'best help to

safeguard a language rather than dictionaries, grammars and databases' (UNESCO 'Oral traditions and expressions' (n.34) cited in Ubertazzi 2020). In the next section, we critically examine UNESCO's practice-based approach to 'language as a vehicle' of ICH.

### **UNESCO's concept of 'language as a vehicle' (UNESCO, Art.2(1))**

Exclusion of language in its own right from the UNESCO Convention means a systematic international approach to safeguarding language as ICH is lacking. This is despite recognition that it plays a crucial role in individual and community identities and well-being (outlined in section 3, and see also e.g. Nic Craith 2010; Berger 2020), particularly in cases of language revitalisation where language may be seen as a marker of nationalism and identity (see Graham and Howard 2008, 6) and must logically be at risk from the same forces that threaten ICH more broadly.

In some instances of ICH listed on the UNESCO registers, language is linked to a safeguarded practice; these are primarily minority, Indigenous languages, rather than dialects and distinct lexicons associated with variations of official languages.<sup>2</sup> For example, Chamame, a form of cultural expression involving close-embrace dancing and celebratory acts in Argentina, was inscribed in 2020 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Its listing includes the Yopara dialect as the vehicle of oral traditions. In a similar vein, a whistled language is listed in La Gomera and the Makgkxlawana Centre for Indigenous Arts (Mexico), entered on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices in 2012, with the aim to revitalise Totonac cultural practices, including through using the Totonac language as the vehicle for teaching.

Language rights under international conventions and national laws tend to focus on protecting individual speakers of minority languages from discrimination, rather than active promotion of those languages or community rights (see e.g. Smeets 2004). Furthermore, international agreements which protect minority language speakers, such as the Council of Europe's European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages, exclude dialects of official languages and recent migratory languages as well as particular specialised vocabularies associated with particular industries. This

raises important questions about the sufficiency of existing protection. The exclusion of language in itself from the UNESCO Convention means that this vital aspect of ICH lacks a safeguarding framework. Furthermore, it seems that the UNESCO literature focuses solely on non-Western cultures (see e.g. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/kit>). One of the reasons for the UNESCO Convention was the frustration felt in countries of the southern hemisphere who protested that the World Heritage List criteria were unsuitable for southern countries (Aikawa-Faure 2009, 15). Although ICH was seen as a way of combatting focus on buildings and monuments, which featured mainly in Western societies, there is now a danger of insinuating that Western countries do not have ICH that needs to be preserved. Similarly, research has tended to focus on how to safeguard minority languages. Studies such as Sarma (2015) have documented how raising the use and prestige of varieties is crucial. For example, there have been attempts to develop a written script with Idu elders to safeguard the Idu-Mishmi language in India, and others in the community have been working to teach local communities the spoken language through rhymes and song to help expand vocabulary (Sarma 2015).

In the next section, we explore practical examples of safeguarding language as ICH in the UK.

### **Language as ICH: safeguarding in practice in the UK**

We turn now to focus on measures intended to safeguard local dialects and lexicons (primarily English in the UK context) that have been associated with occupation-based communities in the UK, particularly mining communities, rather than the minority languages, which form the nexus of the scholarship discussed above (see also Smeets 2004; Fernandez Del Pozo 2017; Gibson 2019). With the rapid processes of deindustrialisation, there are many ways of living which will change beyond recognition, and that includes the lexicons used by those people. Whole ways of life and work are at risk without the knowledge of these specialised registers. Much current research on language focuses on endangered and minority languages, but specialised lexicons are frequently overlooked (see e.g. Donnachie 2010, 135). Local community heritage preservation also requires further investigation to be able to understand how lives were lived. Especially recent industrial history is often not seen as worthy of preservation (see Lu, Liu and Wang

2020, 506 for similar thoughts in China), but it is important to preserve diverse heritage of local and industrial communities and not just focus on the AHD. The UK should consider rationalising its approach to safeguarding ICH, and particularly language as ICH, and we will explore how this could be achieved. This is particularly important to contest views that 'white Westerners apparently have no intangible heritage' (Graham and Howard 2008, 9). We note that the principle of 'cultural connectedness' as protective against some impacts of threats to minoritised communities is a key area of interest and requires further attention. As Smeets (2004, 162) has commented, not all cases of language planning require action, but it may be needed for 'the specialized lexicon that is in use among practitioners, especially in the domains of traditional knowledge and handicrafts [...] in order to preserve the knowledge concerned and to favour its transmission'.

In the case of the distinct 'pit talk' lexicon and dialect of East Midlands miners (see e.g. Braber, Ashmore and Harrison 2017), Braber (2018) has shown that this language forms a large part of the identity and camaraderie of the miners and should be preserved for future generations to understand. The Dialect and Heritage Project based at the University of Leeds in England (funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and which will be discussed in the next section) focuses on language and identity by opening up the Leeds Archive of Vernacular Culture to the public and linking museums and their collections with community events and engagement.

The language of coal miners is particularly interesting because it represents an aspect of heritage which is often overlooked in AHD. During an interview surrounding the Draft Heritage Protection Bill in 2005, the interviewee stated that 'the UK has no intangible heritage' (Smith and Waterton 2009, 297) and that within the English Heritage organisation 'nobody deals with intangibles' (Smith and Waterton 2009, 298). Hassard (2009, 270) has commented that the impact of ICH in the UK is limited because of the vision of cultural inheritance as being tangible and having a material construction. Other researchers have also said that England is more focused on tangible and natural heritage (Smith and Waterton 2009, 289).

Smith (2006) and Coupland and Coupland (2014) have argued that acknowledging a range of heritage discourses hands over space to otherwise silenced voices and identities. Berger (2020, 1) citing Shackel and Palus, has

noted that 'narratives of labour and of the working class are particularly in danger of being silenced and downplayed in official heritage discourses'. As coal mining and the language of pit talk are closely related to working-class, occupation-based practices, it is particularly important to preserve pit talk as ICH to allow communities to access and explore their own identities and cultural inheritance. Coupland and Coupland (2014) have noted that linguistic features including banter and dialect are indexical of class and region within speech. They have commented that 'these are very small indexical elements of a more generally vernacular construction of local experience linked to mining in south Wales' (Coupland and Coupland 2014, 509). Thus, language is established as integral to accessing local identities and ICH of communities. Cave (2001) has studied the use of language as a way to strengthen community bonds. This study looked at different dialect jokes, name-calling and narratives in a Yorkshire coal community, which not only celebrated the distinctiveness of the local coal-mining jargon but also promoted feelings of insiderness and created a socio-occupational boundary for these communities.

How, then, should language such as pit talk be safeguarded? Deuchmert and Storch (2019) have cautioned that current practices which tend to lean towards documenting and archiving language in effect fossilise linguistic practices and colonise them, divorcing them from the communities to which they belong. They have criticised linguists' attempts to record and 'preserve' language for 'social good', arguing that, 'if we wish to understand language as heritage more fully, we need to look beyond language archives and towards the everyday practices of people' (103). Like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) (discussed above), they have argued that language archives move intangible language into materiality, losing many linguistic features in the process of documentation, becoming 'documentary heritage' rather than 'living heritage' (Deumert and Storch 2019, 104). Furthermore, access to such archives can be limited for people from those communities, and some communities may feel that their language does not belong to the whole world (108). These are important points to consider when we question how best to safeguard language as ICH. We do need to consider that all efforts to support language usage, including making whole or partial records, can be beneficial. The aim and effect of frameworks must be to safeguard language and practices, not as static artefacts of history, but to protect and promote the ways in which

local communities engage with, revisit and revise their linguistic practices. More broadly, Logan (2008, 439) has argued that local communities need to have a sense of 'ownership of their heritage'; this reaffirms their worth as a community, their ways of going about things, their 'culture'. Interventions to safeguard language as ICH must therefore place local communities at the heart of their approach.

This was the case in the study mentioned above, which examined the lexical variation of East Midlands mining communities (for full details, see Braber 2022 – 'pit talk' does vary from region to region, and there has been some research on 'pitmatic' in the North East of England. As such this case study could also be applied to other regions, as well as other occupational languages). In July 2015, the last deep coal mine in the East Midlands of England closed. Although the industry was in decline for many years, this final contraction was rapid. Coal mining had been a crucial aspect of the local economy for many years, and many communities relied on coal for their economic survival. Mining gave these communities a sense of identity and belonging. Miners used specific words in their daily work, 'pit talk', which varied from region to region, and many of these words were part of their everyday lives. However, now that all these mines have closed, and the former mining generation are ageing, there was only a short window of opportunity to preserve and investigate these words. With changing industry and the resulting effects on landscaping (many former mining sites were landscaped as country parks or had housing and retail built over them), people realised that almost nothing would be left to remember the industry in the region unless some significant structures were listed and preserved. Different mining heritage groups have been set up to preserve tangible heritage and memorabilia, with a wish to educate younger generations. However, language was rarely considered part of this heritage and tended to be taken for granted. Particularly in the East Midlands, pit talk had received very little interest. So, what could be saved of this important aspect of local culture and heritage in the region? The documentation of pit talk and other language can be used as a means of accessing the cultural heritage of speakers and their families; otherwise, the lexis and paths into understanding tools and skills could become lost when this generation of miners pass away. The mining communities have been keen to share their language with academics in these projects. Furthermore, they have been delighted by how intrigued their families are by the

language. Such community partnerships emphasise that safeguarding by documentation should be collaborative with communities to whom it belongs.

This project scrutinised East Midlands pit talk in order to identify, classify and record the words used and to examine the contribution of this language to regional and local identity. It took account of the movement of miners to determine how and where its influence spread. It also analysed data gathered in the East Midlands and compared this to data from other regions to investigate similarities and differences between different coal-mining areas. Language is seen as important, as a miner's language expressed their culture and lives below and above ground. Examining such a specialised register can enable us to inspect local language variation more generally. When Braber started recording people from around the East Midlands, there were several references to coal mining and to their 'distinctive' language. One interviewee, whose grandfather was a miner, said that the researcher should speak to miners, as they had a language 'all of their own'. When Braber made contacts with miners and former miners, pit talk was often taken for granted rather than celebrated. They were surprised initially that their language could be considered valuable and thought it was 'ordinary' and 'everyday'. At the same time, they increasingly recognised that with the cessation of mining, there was no economic need for the language to be carried forward by future generations and was therefore under threat. Using this language can allow people to link to a particular community and place, and this could give them greater legitimacy in the present (Harrison 2010, 243). Over time, people will know less about the objects involved in the industry, and the knowledge about how these work will be lost; projects which preserve intangible heritage such as language can encourage 'active engagement' and 'collective activity' with the past and its associated culture (Douglas 2017, 133).

Following funding, we were able to carry out interviews and surveys with miners throughout the region. The project has resulted in non-academic publications (Braber et al. 2017; Braber 2018a), as well as academic publications (Braber 2018b; 2022). There was extensive outreach work with heritage groups and coal-mining heritage groups. We also held a celebration event, which was attended by many of the miners who took part in the interviews. We also constructed a website (<https://coalanddialect.wixsite.com/coaldialect>), which included the 'word of the week'

feature that focused on words used in the interviews as well as thematically structured extracts from interviews. The non-academic book included a short dictionary-style list of words used by coal miners as well as some extracts from interviews about some of the most prominent subjects of the interviews, such as the life of miners, mining camaraderie, danger and working conditions, and tools and equipment. These descriptions allowed us to present the words in actual context and show how they were used by miners.

The interviews took place in different stages. Initially, miners from around the region were interviewed to examine local differences. In additional interviews, the most experienced miners, those who had worked for many years in the industry and were often involved in mining heritage groups, were interviewed in pairs by a former miner to facilitate in-depth discussion of language. These interviews were based around the usage of Sense Relation Networks (Llamas 1999) to facilitate discussion. The final round of interviews had to be curtailed due to the Covid-19 pandemic; instead, questionnaires were mailed to a final group of miners to complete data collection. These interviews and surveys allowed for analysis to compare with other mining regions around the UK. We were able to examine the level of knowledge of particular lexical items of the coal-mining industry, and this can also be used by future studies. Interviews with a variety of miners from different mining communities around the East Midlands were needed to examine the extent that there were local differences between Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, as well as to investigate the differences between these regions. Large public interest through local media and word of mouth, as well as close collaboration with four main coal-mining heritage groups, helped us recruit individuals to take part. Having an extended network was helpful in guiding us to interested individuals.

We can use such oral histories and testimonies and combine them with tangible objects to bring them to life and stop them from becoming static (Douglas 2017, 131–132). In a similar way to preserving disappearing dialects, we can ensure we work with community groups and members to ensure that language is documented and can raise awareness within the community groups (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995, 717). The loss of cultural identity and associated language is typical of many post-industrial communities, and engaging with

this can empower communities to work with their own heritage and identity.

## The status of language as ICH in the UK

We turn now to the UK's current approach to safeguarding language as ICH. In the absence of ratification of the UNESCO Convention or other official instruments, action is left to stakeholders such as museums and heritage groups. Although ratification would have to take place at the UK level, responsibility for heritage policy largely lies with the UK's devolved administrations, meaning that alternative positions regarding ICH can still be taken (WSP 2020). The effect is, unsurprisingly, that there is no unified approach across the UK, although there are some initiatives that operate at the national level, and we will discuss examples in Scotland and Wales. It should be flagged that issues around language policies can be contentious and political and, particularly in Northern Ireland, also relate to issues of sectarianism (WSP 2020, 7). In Northern Ireland, there is currently a proposed bill in very early stages around issues of language and identity (see <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3168> for more information).

Waterton and Smith (2008, 297) suggest there is a systemic lack of comprehension of ICH, and they presented interview data which indicate a belief that the UK has no ICH and that ICH is something more appropriate to other, particularly non-Western cultures. This is not a problem that hampers only the UK. Grandjean (n.d.) has used maps to visualise the location of ICH listed on the UNESCO Convention's registers and demonstrated the relative under-representation of Western cultures. This lack of a framework for conceptualising ICH in Western contexts means that effective safeguarding is impossible: 'if it cannot be conceived, and recognised, within the structural, social and discursive relationships of the management process it simply cannot be managed' (Grandjean n.d., 298).

The Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), together with the British Council and Heritage Fund, have created the RSA Heritage Index. This is a UK-wide index of ICH, ranking local authorities and their heritage across different domains. Although it includes intangible heritage within the definition of 'heritage' (see Heritage Index 2020 and Antink 2019), it privileges tangible heritage. The concept of quantifying,

scoring and ranking heritage is potentially subjective and problematic. A search of the 2020 Index returns no details of language-related ICH (other than a brief mention of the Welsh language in Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (RSA 2020, 8)). This would suggest that dialects and Indigenous languages of the UK do not feature in the RSA's Heritage Index.

However, despite these criticisms of the UK's approach to safeguarding language as ICH, there are recent initiatives which recognise its value. At the time of writing, researchers from the University of Leeds are working with a selection of museums to carry out extensive research funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund into dialects across England (see <https://dialectandheritage.org.uk>). Jersey, a self-governing British Crown Dependency, has recently launched a new language policy which provides government-run schools with a framework for supporting multilingual learners and encourages learning of additional languages, including Jèrriais, Jersey's traditional language (Government of Jersey 2022). *ICH Scotland* is a website, which was handed over to Museums Galleries Scotland in 2011, developed by Edinburgh Napier University with Arts and Humanities Research Council funding. The project presents a wiki database, which is updated on an ad hoc basis and accepts contributions from members of the public and organisations. It includes an open-access, searchable register of ICH in Scotland and aims to 'be a reflection of "living" practices and knowledge rather than a record of purely historical ICH' (McCleery et al. 2008, 7). Entries include a range of ICH, including dance, crafts, beliefs and storytelling. The Shetland dialect, which ICH Scotland refers to as a branch of Scots, is included on the register, which notes distinct linguistic features including vocabulary and vowel sounds derived from Scandinavian languages. Nic Craith, Kockel and Lloyd (2019) have noted that the project encountered several problems, primarily rooted in its costs, which limited its success. However, the *ICH Scotland* website is now a live, accessible and user-friendly inventory of Scotland's ICH, and it is notable that Museums and Galleries Scotland was, in 2012, accredited as an expert NGO adviser to UNESCO on the UNESCO Convention.

The Scottish government protects and promotes Gaelic and Scots languages and sees heritage as including both the tangible and intangible (WSP 2020, 7). The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 confers the language with protection and prominence as an

official language of Scotland. It provides, among other measures, for a Gaelic language plan, states that Gaelic must be available as an education medium upon request and provides for organisations and broadcasting of the Gaelic language. Similar provisions have been enacted in relation to the Scots language. Scotland is unable to ratify the Convention; ratification must take place at UK level, and there is pressure from Members of the Scottish Parliament from across political parties for the UK to do so (see e.g. Scottish Parliament S5M-11347, 29 March 2018). Furthermore, Kate Forbes, a Member of the Scottish Parliament and chair of the cross-party committee on Gaelic in the Scottish Parliament, has specifically called for Gaelic to be recorded as UNESCO ICH.

Howell (2013) has been critical of the Westminster government's failure to sign the UNESCO Convention and has debunked any suggestion that the UK, and Wales in particular, lacks ICH. He has identified the Welsh language festival, Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru (National Eisteddfod of Wales) as an example of ICH, citing the Eisteddfod's mission 'to promote the Welsh language and our culture'. He has noted that despite the success of the Eisteddfod, there are problems, including declining participation in some activities, such as folk music and dancing, and tensions between preserving traditions as they were and adapting them to attract more people. However, he argues that 'evolution is a natural process within the ICH spectrum' (Howell 2013, 113). Howell has advocated for the ratification of the UNESCO Convention, asserting that this would increase prestige and awareness of ICH in Wales, contributing to safeguarding efforts. Interestingly, although Wales has considered management of ICH in a recent heritage bill, this bill neglects the Welsh language entirely and a recent report produced for Historic England states that 'considering the rich oral traditions and vibrant life of the Welsh language, the formal governmental engagement with ICH can therefore be summarised as being somewhat neglected' (WSP 2020, 6).

These examples discredit assertions that ICH is not relevant in the UK context and illustrate a range of initiatives to safeguard language as ICH. The ICH Scotland wiki could be considered similar to the UNESCO Convention register, albeit a more interactive, bottom-up version, as it is open to contributions from individuals and communities. The Eisteddfod, first convened in the 19th century, is an example of living ICH, but one which Howell (2013) believes would reap benefits should the UK ratify

the UNESCO Convention. The RSA Index, the only UK-wide register that includes ICH, does not reflect the approach of the UNESCO Convention's registers. Rather than itemising community heritage, it ranks local authorities on the basis of the amount of heritage (principally tangible, environmental and natural) they have; it is not designed for the public or other interested parties to seek out particular communities' heritage. These instances also highlight the lack of a consistent approach to ICH in the UK.

Of course, there are more examples of museums and heritage groups in the UK safeguarding language ICH (and the ways this is done will be examined elsewhere), including the National Coal Mining Museum, Big Pit National Mining Museum of Wales and the Black Country Living Museum, which all seek to preserve dialects, vocabulary and accents associated with occupations and local communities. However, some of these are short-term projects, or exhibitions and resources are not always easy to locate nor promoted prominently on websites. There are also language corpora which can be used to safeguard language, and the Newcastle Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English has interviews with Tyneside people in the late 1960s and early 1990s which can be accessed to examine language as a vehicle of ICH (see Allen et al. 2006).

## Conclusion

In this article, we argue that the UK must properly consider how best to safeguard ICH, including language, and that ratifying the UNESCO Convention could be one part of the puzzle. As Nic Craith, Kockel and Lloyd (2019, 127) have argued, non-signatories miss out on a great deal of international collaboration on ICH, and there is a crucial 'moral argument' that 'the more nation-states that ratify the Convention, the greater the standing of ICH as a resource for humanity on a global scale'. This echoes the arguments of Howell (2013) that ratification would boost prestige and awareness around ICH. Nic Craith, Kockel and Lloyd (2019) have adopted a 'change from within stance', arguing that states such as the UK should ratify the UNESCO Convention and then seek to work towards more 'holistic' approaches to heritage.

Signing the UNESCO Convention will not fully resolve the protection and promotion of language associated with industries such as coal mining (particularly as no funding is offered to ensure such safeguarding, so it can be seen

as a status-enhancing framework rather than an actual method for safeguarding), but if no national and official initiatives are taken, the UK risks a fragmented approach to the safeguarding of ICH, in which local communities lose access to their heritage and associated identities. Of course, a major obstacle to safeguarding language as ICH is its omission from the UNESCO Convention, although it is possible to list language as a vehicle for the transmission of skills or oral traditions, such as storytelling or singing. Considering language as ICH may encourage museums and heritage organisations which currently focus on tangible heritage to include ICH within their policy objectives, address the perception that the UK has no ICH and consider language as ICH. Safeguarding heritage does not have to mean making it static and not allowing for change; evolution is part of the process.

Drawing attention to the cultural practices of local communities may be a double-edged sword, bringing awareness, funding and prestige at the same time as exposing pockets of cultural heritage to the demands of tourism. This underlines the need for a carefully designed, national-scale framework which places local communities and identities at the heart of ICH safeguarding measures, to ensure that ownership remains with them and that ICH evolves according to their needs, rather than remaining frozen in time. These communities and groups must have support from local, regional and national authorities to enable them to preserve their languages and develop their ICH (Smeets 2004, 160).

The authors of this article have recently interviewed museum professionals to find out how museums and heritage organisations are currently treating dialects, accents and lexicons associated with industries and occupations. This project will provide examples of current and best practice that will feed into the discussions about how frameworks for safeguarding language as ICH should take form in the UK. 

## ENDNOTES

1. In Article 2(3) of the Convention, UNESCO states that by 'safeguarding' they mean measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.
2. The distinction between 'language' and 'dialect' is not always straightforward and can be political in terms of nationhood. From a linguistic point of view, 'accent' refers to pronunciation language, 'dialect' refers to word choice, syntax and other discourse features (see for example Trudgill 1999). When we refer to lexicon, we refer to specific vocabularies which can be linked to particular occupational or other groups.

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