Inhabiting a Language: Linguistic Interactions as a Living Repository for Intangible Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

The UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) recognises as living heritage cultural expressions and practices that provide for the continuity, dynamism and meaning of the social life of individuals and communities. The organisation emphasises the need to document and safeguard intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as a source of people's identity, which gives them a feeling of belonging and represents cultural capital. One of the forms of safeguarding ICH endorsed by UNESCO is the creation of national inventories to catalogue the heritage and make it accessible to the public. However, inventorying living heritage runs a risk of essentialising culture and 'fixing' cultural practices in time. And while it is only natural that the forms of cultural expressions may change with time, the meaning of those practices should be protected, for in it lies the cultural value of heritage. This theoretical paper looks at language as a vehicle of culture that gives meaning to people's experiences, while remaining a tool that adapts its form to changing environments. Therefore, language can be considered a repository and an organic inventory system for the living heritage, as the latter is primarily contained in the linguistic interactions of the people who produce it. Accordingly, the paper advocates for a greater protection and promotion of vernacular languages by assisting communities in developing them and sustaining their local cultural practices.

Keywords

language, vernacular, inventory, living heritage, sustainable development, social constructionism, Bourdieu's theory of practice, habitus

Introduction

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural* Heritage, adopted in 2003, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) comprises practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills recognised by the communities as part of their cultural heritage. Transmitted from generation to generation, these practices and expressions are constantly renegotiated and reinvented by the people in response to the social and natural environment in which they live, and the history of their community. Through culture and heritage, people acquire a sense of identity and continuity (UNESCO, n.d., p.

3). UNESCO's definition of ICH includes language as a vehicle for oral traditions and cultural expressions (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). Yet it can be argued that language itself represents people's heritage; it displays all the parameters to be considered ICH – it is transmitted from generation to generation; constantly recreated; speech can be treated as linguistic practice and expressions; language bestows identity upon people in the same way that social practices, rituals or indigenous knowledge do (Smeets, 2004).

What UNESCO's definition of ICH indirectly says is that culture is not firm. It is dynamic and constantly changing. At the same time the organisation (2003, p. 1) speaks of the need to safeguard heritage from disappearing and to protect culture against globalisation, modernisation, urbanisation, and environmental degradation – i.e. against change. However, the continual performance of the so-called 'traditional' practices, often referred to as 'living heritage', naturally necessitates alterations in their outer form in response to the changing environment and the socio-economic context. Change is thus part of the 'life' of ICH. What should be protected in the living heritage is its cultural value which lies in the meaning of cultural expressions. Meaning is what gives ICH its aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, and symbolic values.

The organisation defines 'safeguarding' as:

> *... 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 o f such heritage* (2003, article 2, 3).

One of the forms of safeguarding ICH prescribed by the organisation is the creation of national inventories that will, among other roles, raise awareness about the intangible heritage of communities and make it accessible to the public (UNESCO, 2003, article 12; n.d., p. 4). Describing the process of inventorying, UNESCO stipulates that documentation should consist of recording the heritage in tangible form in its current state and preserving related documents in institutions such as libraries, archives, or on the web, where these records are easily available and may be consulted. These inventories must be regularly updated to account for modifications of the living heritage (UNESCO, 2003, article 12). UNESCO (n.d. p. 4) further emphasises that safeguarding is about transferring the knowledge, skills and meaning, not preserving the external form of heritage, which may already have become irrelevant for a particular community. Nevertheless, in response to this call for national inventories, heritage practitioners and scholars have raised concerns that the institutionalisation of the living heritage risks 'freezing' it in time, and this kind of 'salvage ethnography' based on a 'preservationist ethos' (Alivizatou, 2012, p. 14) might in effect hinder the development of cultural expressions (Alivizatou, 2006 and 2012). Moreover, UNESCO claims that inventories should encourage creativity and self-respect in the communities (UNESCO, n.d., p. 4). However, it can be argued that the self-respect should come from within the communities before the process of documentation of heritage starts, not as a result of inventorying cultural expressions that the people have to first consider as valuable to identify them as their heritage. The sustainability of heritage lies in the ownership of heritage resources, thus value needs to be assigned to heritage by local communities. *Only if the individual is enabled to understand, interpret and appropriate the heritage of mankind as personal heritage and inheritance, can protection and use of heritage become sustainable* (Albert, 2012, p. 37).

It should be recognised that the cultural value of heritage (knowledge, skills, meaning) that should be safeguarded is stored in the language in which a particular expression has been created and in which it still functions. Language therefore is an organic 'living repository' and inventory that guards the meaning of the practices, and naturally evolves with cultural expressions as they adapt to the changing environment. Living heritage is primarily contained in the linguistic interactions of the people to whom it belongs. Accordingly, one of the biggest challenges of preserving and sharing the meaning of ICH lies in the language which transmits it and creates understanding. To preserve the meaning of cultural practices and ensure the sustainability of the socio-cultural development of the communities which still practise them, the promotion and development of vernacular languages that 'created' the experiences need to be considered as primary measures in the safeguarding of ICH. These languages need to be recognised as valid and valuable cultural and social practices that enable communities to grow, and through which people express their identity and define their realities.

Conceptual framework

Emile Cioran (1998), a Romanian philosopher, said that *one does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language*. Language is a type of cultural and social code which enables us to construct concepts through which we express ourselves and describe the way we experience the world. In essence, through discourse we actually construct our reality.

According to social constructionists, reality cannot be learnt. It is created and perceived through people's interactions. Constructionists reject the cognitive understanding of knowledge, claiming that there is no structure or framework upon which we can produce knowledge (Bruffee, 1986, p. 776). The reality is not 'what exists' but a concept agreed upon by a group of people who constitute it and construct it through language. There are multiple social realities, all of which depend on beliefs about the physical world shared by the communities that produce meanings and generate knowledge (Gergen, 1982; Rorty in Bruffee, 1986):

> *One of the important assumptions of cognitive thought is that there must be a universal foundation, a ground, a base, a framework, a structure of some sort behind knowledge or beneath it, upon which what we know is built, assuring its certainty or truth. We normally think of that ground or structure as residing either in the inner eye (a concept, an idea, a theory), or in nature as mirrored in the mind (the world, reality, facts). The social constructionist alternative to this foundational cognitive assumption is non-foundational...* (Bruffee, 1986, p. 776).

It is discursive. Kuhn (1970), who believed in the relativism of scientific knowledge, and Rorty (1979) after him even claimed that knowledge can be identified with the language in which it is produced.

Social constructionism does not focus on an individual, who mentally constructs reality through observation and experience, but puts emphasis on the social interactions of people, on the social processes by which meanings are created and negotiated (Schwandt, 2003). And as much as constructionists refer to reality as the subjective experience of life, they recognise that certain actions – responses to the social world – can be repeated routinely, and consequently turn into patterns. Sanctioned by society, they then start to be perceived as objective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1991), recreated and reaffirmed through discourse by subsequent generations.

Language assigns definitions to these patterns but can also alter them. Hence, discourse can bring about change (Burr, 1995). Human beings as agents are in control of reality, as they socially define it (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Burr, 1995). Who is able to change it, and how, depends on who holds the power (Burr, 1995); as a result some voices tend to be silent as they are sidelined by the grand narrative.

Knowledge is produced in a particular social and cultural environment and expressed through people's actions, such as communication (Dewey, 1920). Consequently, the setting, participants and actions undertaken constitute the simplest model of control (or context model) for a discursive situation; Van Dijk (2007, p. 3) calls it the s*ituatedness of talk*. He pinpoints the fact that *... the situation-discourse relation is necessarily indirect and established by the participants ... It is the way participants understand and represent the social situation that influences discourse structures* (van Djik, 2007, p. 4).

The sustainable development paradigm – language as a part of culture

Language gives structure and meaning to experience by constructing concepts. This generative process is dependent on the socio-cultural context in which it takes place. Culture constitutes a foundation of one's identity (Baumann, 1999; Taylor,1994) and as such represents each individual's frame of reference. Therefore, it should be mainstreamed into all development policies.

Sustainable development emerged as a concept in the 1970s and was recognised as a paradigm in 1992 at the Rio de Janeiro Summit. Since then, the three-pillar framework which validates the links between people's economic development, their social context, and the natural environment in which they function, has been used by academics and policy-makers as a premise for designing developmental strategies and projects attuned to the needs and capacities of the populations concerned. The model created was obviously based on the standpoint which considers human beings as part of the natural world, not separate from it. It ascertains that people and the environment in which they live are interrelated and each has an impact, both good and bad, on the existence and functioning of the other. Only in the last decade has it been recognised that the 'three-legged stool' model of sustainable

development might be missing an element (UNESCO, 2005; UNGA, 2010; UCLG, 2010; UNTT, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). A debate has opened up about the contingency of development upon the cultural background of the populations concerned. As a result, the international community suggested including culture as a fourth dimension of sustainable development in the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) (UCLG, 2010).[1]

It can be argued that culture has always been included in the framework as part of its social dimension tenet. However, while it is true that both culture and social structure belong to the class of control systems and are closely interwoven, to equate cultural systems with social systems is not entirely adequate.

> *By contrast with the cultural system, which is specifically concerned with systems of meaning, the social system is a way of organising human action which is concerned with linking meaning to the conditions of concrete behaviour in the environmentally given world* (Parsons, 1972, p. 256).

According to Parsons (1972, p. 256), the most important element of the cultural system for the social one is the moral-evaluative aspect (the value systems). It acts as a type of inner control within the social system. Meanwhile, the outer control is made up of the legislative power created within the social structure (Stahovski, n.d.). Culture also constitutes a collective mechanism for the storage of information (Posner, 2004, p. 28). The knowledge contained in it is associated with a particular group of people and their language, seen in a historical perspective. It is thus intertwined with and influenced by the social structure, but is not necessarily aligned with it.

All of the above-mentioned roles of culture point to the fact that the development of societies should be consistent with their cultural background, as the latter constitutes an essential element of people's identity, the context for their lives, and a regulator of their activities. Thus, only culture-sensitive development that does not disrupt the very basis of one's self-construction can be deemed truly sustainable. And even more than that, developmental strategies built upon the body of knowledge 'stored' within different cultures can prove more effective, given the age-old connection between humans and nature on which the existence of the human race has depended and around which civilisations developed.

> *Acknowledgement of cultural diversity adds a crucial dimension to strategies that view sustainability as facilitating the integration of the economic pillar of development with its social and environmental pillars. In this sense, cultural diversity can be seen as a key cross-cutting dimension of sustainable development* (UNESCO World Report, n.d., p. 25).

Moreover, including culture in the SDGs agenda, and promoting pluralism, means embracing the idea that sustainable development should be understood as an improvement of human well-being rather than simply as economic growth. It should therefore translate into engaging and empowering people by acknowledging their local knowledge, appreciating traditional values, and recognising the agency of communities. Furthermore, in searching for solutions for environmental challenges, it should look at and learn from the sustainability of traditional societies, and respect people's freedom to choose their developmental path in accordance with their systems of beliefs and values. The new paradigm thus places the accent on human well-being, both physical and mental, and emphasises the diversity of agencies. As a result, it replaces the top-down model of development previously applied within the framework by giving the power back to the communities.

Biocultural diversity – language as a repository

The biocultural diversity framework is another perspective which emphasises the importance of language as the repository of knowledge. The biocultural diversity research field tries to understand how evolution within the natural realm affects the human realm by studying changes observed within socio-linguistic ecologies (ecolinguistics).[2] Harmon (1996) suggested that people's advancement happened alongside the changes to which humans subjected their local ecosystems. While humans were adapting to these modifications, the language that they devised on the way helped them to encode and convey the knowledge of the ecosystem they inhabited. Language was shaped by and adapted to the particular socio-ecological environment and served as a transmitter of a specific reality (Maffi, 2005, p. 605). Consequently, when speaking about the human-nature relationship, we need to recognise it not only on the levels of the social sphere and the physical environment, but also within the linguistic ecology. It can be further argued that since traditional knowledge of

ecosystems is implicit in the languages of their inhabitants, the natural environment can also be affected indirectly by the loss of a language (Maffi, 2005, pp. 601-603). As Sapir (1912, p. 228) noticed, language bears *the stamp of the physical environment in which the speakers are placed*. Therefore, we can say that not only culture and the natural environment constitute the setting of human experience, language does too. The biocultural research field, though focusing on the relationship between languages, cultures and the environment from the perspective of the natural sciences, correlates with the social sciences' approach. It confirms that language discloses a particular reality and stores the 'objective' knowledge about it produced by generations of people. Language transmits concepts that cannot be expressed in a different 'code system' and thus represents a repository of the cultural memory of people (Maffi, 2005); and heritage exists through memory. Therefore, protection of linguistic diversity is directly linked to the sustainability of communities (Maffi, 2007; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 2010).

Bourdieu's theory of practice

Using this conceptual framework, Bourdieu's theory of practice can be applied to understand the nature of cultural practices and the role that language plays in the preservation of the living heritage. This theory (Bourdieu, 1994 and 1996) sees social practices as products of the relationship between a particular field (that represents social spaces) and a 'habitus' (defined as a set of dispositions that structure human actions in unconscious ways). It asserts that habitus is a product of history, constantly being created through experience. In line with this theory, language is perceived as a socio-historical phenomenon, where every linguistic interaction reflects and reproduces the social structures within which the language has been formed and is currently used.

Bourdieu's theory speaks to the role of a human being as a social agent. This capacity is activated through one's relation to a social space (field) defined by Bourdieu (1996, p. 12) as *an invisible set of relationships which tends to retranslate itself into a physical space in the form of a definite distributional arrangement of agents and properties*. Scientific, religious, academic, political or other, the fields are the 'spheres of action' of the society, and they are subject to internally-established systems of power. Social agents are allocated to a particular social space (which is not the same as social class), usually based on the economic capital, cultural capital or symbolic capital that they carry.[3] These 'social positions' need to take account of the historical period under consideration. Within them, habitus acts as both a 'structured structure' and as a 'structuring structure' (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 15-17) – structured structures being the principles of practices characteristic for a particular class of agents; structuring structures being the different classifications of these principles (based, for example, on taste or perception). The different classifications are produced through the socialisation of an individual that takes place within the family, culture and educational milieu. Therefore, the nature of habitus is fluid; it depends on the circumstances, environment and the historical background of an individual. Consequently, habitus introduces relativism to the social world, for the same practice may be perceived differently according to one's taste, beliefs, interests, or understanding (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 17). The individual's position within a specific field depends on their habitus. When the field and the habitus become incompatible with one another, the individual may experience the feeling of being lost or out of place (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 17).

Bourdieu's theory of practice challenges the de-historicisation of social practices, including ICH expressions. Moreover, it demonstrates that living heritage, when separated from the language which created it, will change, as the habitus through which it was expressed would now be different. *Linguistic utterances are forms of practice and, as such, can be understood as the product of the relation between the linguistic habitus and a linguistic market* (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 17). Language is formed in a specific social and political environment. Therefore, linguistic exchanges reveal the social structure that they express and reproduce. It should be emphasised here that 'linguistic communism' is a fiction. No community has a truly homogenous language; the way people speak depends on the social conditions in which they communicate with one another (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5). Moreover, linguistic interactions carry the mark of power. Accent, intonation, and the vocabulary used can disclose the position the speaker holds in the social hierarchy; they reflect the socially-structured character of the habitus and have value – linguistic capital – assigned to them by the market in which they were produced (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 18).

Bourdieu (1993) speaks also about the so-called 'authorised language', which is the symbolic discourse used in rituals. He argues that these linguistic exchanges are not simply communication; the scholar emphasises the importance of both the content of the speech and the speaker uttering the words.

> *The power of words is nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson, and his speech – that is, the substance of his discourse and, inseparably, his way of speaking – is no more than a testimony, and one among others, of the guarantee of delegation which is vested in him* (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 105).

The speaker represents a particular social field and occupies a specific social position that legitimises the speech by his/her authority (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 109). The performative utterance can play its expected role only if the right words are spoken in a 'prescribed' way by a person with an appropriate social function, recognised as being authorised to do so. Both formal and ritual conditions need to be met for the ritual or practice to be successful (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 111-113).

Discussion

Even though UNESCO recognises the dynamic nature of culture, the organisation envisions protection of ICH in a way that does not account sufficiently for the character of the cultural field and the processes of change which are intrinsic to it. UNESCO sees culture primarily as embodied in cultural artefacts, rather than the social practices of people. In the same way, most international instruments focus on the protection of languages rather than their speakers (Mowbray, 2012, pp. 84-85). In line with this thinking, the *Convention* speaks of mitigating the effects of globalisation on traditional cultures using a *preservationist discourse of dying traditions and overpowering modernity* (Alivizatou, 2011, p. 39). UNESCO's format emphasises uniqueness, excellence and the endangerment of inventoried cultural expressions. An inherent notion in this concept is that of cultural authenticity, understood as original and unmodified traditions that were not 'contaminated' by modernity and global hybridisation. Such an approach to ICH *puts forward a homogenizing vision of pure, endangered, and authentic cultural expressions* (Alivizatou, 2011, p. 55) and leads to the essentialisation of culture. Inventories as a means of preserving ICH challenge the ongoing change and adaptation of cultural expressions and separate them from the practitioners of the living heritage.

International regulations (including UNESCO's *Convention*) adopted to protect cultural and linguistic diversity tend to fix cultures and languages territorially (Mowbray, 2012, pp. 84-85)[4] and bind them to ethnic identity, even though it is nations that arose from languages and not the other way around (de Seville, 2007, p. 192). These legal instruments rarely take into consideration the fluctuations in demographics caused by global change (such as migrations), and treat languages as homogenous phenomena.

Bourdieu's theory of practice demonstrates the dynamism of cultural practices. The analysis of the cultural field proposed by the scholar suggests that the development of cultures is not linear; therefore, the results of the processes of contestation and negotiation within the cultural field cannot be predicted (Mowbray, 2012). The processes and practices that constitute living heritage are recreated by present generations who reinvent their connection with the past (Alivizatou, 2006, p. 48). The *Convention for Safeguarding ICH*, founded on concerns about the decline and destruction of living heritage, does not take account of these processes of renewal (Alivizatou, 2011).

Additionally, Bourdieu's theory asserts the essential link between living heritage and the context in which it was produced – the people, places and resources. Therefore, the preoccupation of international regulations and cultural heritage protectors should be with the people rather than their product. In line with this approach, Alivizatou (2006 and 2011) suggests shifting from the preservation of disappearing practices to the celebration of ongoing traditions that are refurbished and renegotiated by contemporary generations. Such a shift would leave traditions open to change and reinterpretation, and would focus safeguarding efforts on the communities and the environment in which they practise their living heritage, instead of on the heritage itself.

The same is valid for languages, given that they are the vehicles by which culture is passed on and are themselves part of human heritage. Language is a code for representing experience; it creates the social context in which it is used. When a language dies, the meaning of cultural expressions and the knowledge they carry are easily lost. Another language will not convey the same messages, for it will not repeat the structure of the code, and so it will not transmit the social context in which the interaction took place. In 2002 UNESCO noted that:

> *...about half of the 6,000 or so languages spoken in the world are under threat. Over the past three centuries, languages have died out and disappeared at a dramatic and steadily increasing pace, especially in the Americas and Australia. Today at least 3,000 tongues are endangered, seriously endangered or dying in many parts of the world* (UNESCO, 2002).

According to Moseley, in 2010 about 2,471 languages were considered endangered (Moseley, 2010). Bernini lists three main threats to language diversity (Bernini, 2014, p. 164):

- Linguistic imperialism and globalisation, which cause the domination of some languages and result in local or minority languages being abandoned by their speakers who consider them impractical and less valuable.
- National language policies that subordinate language to ethnic identity and linguistic uniformity in line with European ideologies on which nation-states were founded.
- Language shift that takes place mostly due to urbanisation, globalisation, social dislocation, and the cultural dislocation of the speakers; it may result in the loss of languages which further leads to the loss of identity.

However, it should also be emphasised that languages, like cultures, evolve. Therefore change and synthesis should be seen as essential and necessary aspects of their vitality. As Alivizatou (2011, p. 55) noted, cross-cultural exchange often revives rather than threatens cultural heritage, making it more relevant to the contemporary needs of a community in a specific cultural environment. The past is a 'renewable resource' (Holtorf, 2006), thus Western preservationist practices are not relevant as tools for keeping ICH alive. Bharucha (2000, as related by Alvizatou, 2012, p. 16) recognised that;

> *traditional practices and ceremonies transmitted from the past and reinterpreted in the present offer an alternative framework of cultural transmission that is not embedded in documentation and preservation, but in a cyclical and performative process of creation, destruction and renewal.*

Eurocentric norms of authenticity and the irreparability of cultural heritage should therefore be replaced by the discourse of transformation and renewal (Alivizatou, 2006).

Instead of documenting and inventorying living heritage, we should focus on assisting local communities on their developmental paths so that they can enjoy and sustain the cultural practices that contribute to their cultural identity. Promoting the development of local languages through which this identity is bestowed is in this case of key importance. Too much meaning is lost in translation. Designing curriculum materials in the vernacular, and including cultural practices, customs and traditions considered by the communities to be their living heritage as part of school education taught in the original languages that produced them, would ensure the authentic transfer of knowledge and traditional skills. Teaching *about* cultural practices, instead of learning and living them, and using cultural expressions only for display will see them lose their cultural value and become performances deprived of soul. Living heritage exists through living people and is communicated, negotiated and reinvented in their language, through memory. Therefore, policies and regulations pertaining to the protection and promotion of vernacular languages should be integrated with national and international laws relating to ICH, whether we define language as ICH *per se* or merely as a vehicle thereof.

ENDNOTES:

• This work is based on research supported in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Number 103462)

1. See also http://www.agenda21culture.net/index.php/documents/culture-as-a-goal-in-post-2015
2. A field of study pioneered by Einar Haugen which describes relationships between languages and the populations that speak them with regard to their social, biological and physical environments. See Haugen, E., 1971. 'The ecology of language' in *The Linguistic Reporter*, Supplement 25: pp. 19-26; also Mühlhäuser, P., 1996. Linguistic ecology. *Language change and linguistic imperialism in the Pacific region*. London, Routledge.
3. For definitions of the capitals, see Bourdieu, P., 1993. *Language and Symbolic Power* (edited and introduced by J. Thompson). Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 14.
4. See also UNESCO, n.d. *Identifying and Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Available from: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/01856-EN.pdf, where the physical location of the ICH element is included in a suggested format for an inventory.

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