

# A TOOL FOR ENHANCING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

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For the Maaya network, I propose adapting the methodology developed for the creation of a portal for the languages of Europe and the Mediterranean, *Langues d'Europe et de la Méditerranée (LEM)*. This is an internet portal prototype devoted to the national, regional and minority languages of these regions. It was implemented thanks to support from the French Ministry of Culture. It may be accessed at <http://portal-lem.com>.

The aim of the LEM portal is to enhance and promote the linguistic diversity found in the broad geopolitical region covering Europe and the Mediterranean zone, but it further hopes to foster such actions world wide.

## 1. THE REASONS BEHIND THE UNDERTAKING

The usefulness of this tool - which I refer to in this paper as the "LEM portal", but which of course would have a different name if the methodology were applied to other geopolitical areas - is justified by the following considerations.

Legal instruments at local, national and international levels are indispensable for preserving humanity's linguistic diversity. However the rule of law cannot transform the current situation of endangered languages if it is not based on rigorous public awareness raising.

The LEM portal proposes to contribute to mobilization around this issue by creating and disseminating information on the languages spoken in our society, information which is both scientifically sound and presented in a user-friendly environment. By showcasing a broad range of world views and the irreplaceable masterpieces that all languages produce, we contribute to fostering a positive perception of diversity.

Our work participates in the logic adopted by the Council of Europe in their creation of the *European day of languages* which, in 2001 defined objectives which our portal strives to meet in its own fashion:

« There is a need to increase popular knowledge and understanding of the diversity of the languages of Europe, and of the factors affecting their maintenance and growth. There is a need to generate a greater interest in and curiosity about languages. There is a need to enhance linguistic tolerance within and between nations ».

## 2. TIMELINESS OF THE INITIATIVE

The detailed study of the main generalist websites devoted to languages shows that, for now, there are no sites which convincingly fulfill the objectives quoted above.

In preparation for the LEM project, we reviewed in detail the main sites devoted to languages in English, French, Italian and Spanish. The principle sites we examined were notably:

- [\*Wikipedia, Language Portal\*](#): Their collaborative approach has enabled Wikipedia to constitute the best source of information on languages available today.
- [\*Ethnologue\*](#): the well known site of the Dallas-based Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), gives various indications, but they are difficult to synthesize and their reliability has yet to be demonstrated.
- [\*Euromosaic\*](#) is a site which presents the results of a study commissioned in 1993 by the European Commission on a number of regional languages in several countries in the European Union.
- The site [\*L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde\*](#), set up by Jacques Leclerc, gives a solid overview of the linguistic policies in the countries studied.
- [\*Linguamón - House of languages\*](#), an organization set up in Barcelona by the government of Catalonia, proposes an encyclopedic website which so far has not gone beyond the status of project.

A feature shared by all these websites is that their presentation of languages does not make them attractive. They present study results (*Euromosaic*), collections of studies (*L'aménagement linguistique*), or simple notices (*Ethnologue*). From an organization such as *Linguamón* one would have expected the data to be presented so as to arouse the browser's interest. Not at all! Their notices are the pale copy of an encyclopedia... In the end, *Wikipedia* provides the most wealth of information, in the most attractive manner.

There is a clear lack of generalist information on linguistic diversity that the multiplicity of websites, of highly unequal quality, devoted to one language or another, cannot compensate for.

### 3. THE LEM PROPOSAL

Given this situation, and to meet the objectives defined above, the LEM portal proposes a methodology characterized by two fundamental choices.

#### 3. 1. VALID KNOWLEDGE, RECOGNIZED BOTH BY THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL STAKEHOLDERS

Information gathering is based on the creation of a *federative documentary network*, where the design is inspired by recent research into the notions of workflow and «hybrid intelligence networks». The knowledge produced in this fashion will be legitimate both for the scientific community and social stakeholders. It will be updated regularly, thanks to the federative documentary network set up.

This site will make reference information available online, the information will be provided through continuous discussion with users, and will be validated by a Scientific Committee.

#### 3. 2. THE LEM WEBSITE PROTOTYPE FOR PRESENTING LANGUAGES MEETS THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES

This site presents the information in an attractive manner, using the most innovative and reliable technological resources. We offer precise information on the linguistic data which characterize each language. We highlight the equal dignity of all languages by making available selected documentation on the cultural creativity of each language: from poetry and literature to music, theater, and even visual art.

- The utmost care is taken to ensure that reading the general presentation of a language is particularly pleasant thanks to the quality of the descriptions and the illustrations chosen.
- A standardized layout provides the essential technical characteristics of each language.
- Developing an online mini-site for each language illustrates the equal dignity of all languages and proposes selected documents highlighting cultural diversity: from poetry to music, theater and even visual arts.

The implementation of the LEM portal is carried out in such a way that the site can be optimally referenced by search engines. This means of course that the work respects the recommendations of the W3C, is written in HTML 5 and encoded using UTF 8.

## 4. DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

The LEM portal's implementation is directed by Henri Giordan, formerly research director at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and currently president of the Forum des Langues de France, a non-profit organization which provided the legal support for the prefiguration phase.

Work is already underway in Italy, with a team chaired by Professor Giovanni Agresti at the University of Teramo (Abruzzes) with the Association [LEM-Italia](#). The results of this work will be published in the series "Sociolingua", the first issue will be forthcoming shortly.

To meet the objectives defined above, regional task forces must be set up to implement the project. The Maaya network could play an essential role in the process.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is crucial to refrain from launching massive projects to cover all of the world's languages, or even all of the languages of a given region such as Europe or Africa. Most projects of this type, from Ethnologue to Wikipedia, have had such ambitions, with disappointing results.

I believe in a more realistic approach: to hope to set up task forces in a given region, one must start with initiatives already strongly grounded locally, and define a very precise scope.

A set of such sites would provide a concrete vision of the realities covered by the principles of the future World Summit on Multilingualism.

The actions which will mark the future of humanity obey the logic of networks and grassroots initiatives. Let us draw inspiration from the actions of the Hummingbird:

*One day, legend has it, there was a huge forest fire. All the animals were terrified, overwhelmed, and helplessly watched as the forest burned. Only the hummingbird was busy, going to the stream, getting a few drops of water, and putting them on the fire. After a while, the armadillo, annoyed by the futile agitation, said to it: « Hummingbird! Are you mad? It is not with a few drops of water that you will put out the fire! »*

*And the hummingbird answered: « I know, but I am doing the best I can ».*

*(Native American legend, told e.g. by Pierre Rabhi in French and Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai in English)<sup>1</sup>*

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1. <http://www.colibris-lemouvement.org/colibris/la-legende-du-colibri>