2019 Year of Indigenous Languages

Presentation
Camiel Hamans,
Associate Secretary General of CIPL,
Comité International Permanent de Linguistes,
Founded in The Hague in 1928

CIPL AND THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

1. Introduction
CIPL is the oldest organization bringing together linguists from all over the world. It was founded at the time of the First International Congress of Linguists, which took place at The Hague in 1928.

Last Summer, in July 2018, the 20th International Congress of Linguists took place in Cape Town, South Africa, the first ever such congress to be held in Africa. At the conference and in the book that was released at the occasion of this world congress, future perspectives were outlined for the many subdisciplines of linguistics, but with a strong emphasis on the study of endangered languages and on the ways in which these languages can be protected and promoted. In addition, the Endangered Language Award, a prize which was established by CIPL 15 years ago, was awarded to prof. Kemmony C. Monaka, from the University of Botswana.

2. CIPL’s contribution in 2019
When CIPL was founded the focus of linguistic research was not at the multicoloured languages of the world. On the one hand the focus was still on the historical family relations between languages and on the other hand on the structural aspects of language. It still were the days in which now outdated ideas about monolingual nation states prevailed, especially in Europe. Linguists did not differ so much from the rest of the world’s population. However, linguists contemplated about the nature of language and so started to realize that one’s own language is a fundamental part of one own’s identity and of the identity of the group to which one belongs.

That is why during the 14th International Congress of Linguists in Berlin (1987) a petition was filed and accepted to pay more attention to Endangered Languages and already the 15th International Congress of Linguists in Québec (1992) was completely devoted to this theme. A series of keynote papers was commissioned from leading experts in each area of the world, and the resulting Congress volume under the title Endangered languages (edited by Robins & Uhlenbeck) was the first worldwide survey of the field.

One of CIPL’s former Presidents, the late prof. Stephen Wurm, was a leading figure in raising worldwide interest among linguists in the issue of language endangerment and indigenous languages. Wurm compiled a number of important works including the UNESCO atlas of endangered languages, published 1996. Through Wurms fundraising skills CIPL has been able to make a large number of small grants for work on endangered languages.

As you all know a second edition of Wurm’s Atlas appeared in 2001. In 2010, here in Paris, a new and much expanded version, both online and in print, came out under the direction of Chris Moseley.
And today, there are plans for a new and even bigger Atlas of All the World’s Languages - not just the endangered ones – to be developed and realised in cooperation with UNESCO.

For now, CIPL’s first contribution to the International Year of Indigenous Languages which we inaugurate here in Paris today, will be – jointly with Leiden University in cooperation with a range of Linguistics Institutes on all the continents of the world – the establishment of a Chair, together with a global research network, on Global Ethnolinguistic Diversity and Vitality, which over the next five years will develop and carry out a focussed programme of study.

CIPL’s second contribution will be realised jointly with our fellow researchers of the Linguistics Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences - an international conference in Moscow in early April, The Linguistic Forum 2019: Indigenous Languages of Russia and Beyond. This conference is now being planned and organised; we hope it will also be one of the UNESCO Regional Conferences, within the year-long programme of events for the Year of Indigenous Languages. We expect this conference will contribute a lot of findings and ideas to the planning and preparation of the hard work that will be long and much-needed after 2019.

3. Outlook
Our wish is that in so doing CIPL may contribute to, and may see the first beginnings of, the realisation of something that is much needed but does not exist as yet: a full-scale, working, state-of-the-art online Atlas of ALL the World’s Languages. The plans are there, and our hope is that the Year of Indigenous Languages may serve to set them in motion.

We should try and bring together all available linguistic and other relevant scholarly expertise. However, we should also be realistic: the transition from the existing 2700 languages in the existing UNESCO Atlas to all 7000 languages will require a major effort worldwide, if we want to achieve a full record of those 7000.

Our goal for 2019 is this: CIPL stands ready and will work with, help out, contribute to, facilitate and stimulate scholarly contributions from linguists the world over, and by the end of 2019 we should all have fleshed out what is needed here and what can realistically be done within the parameters of the time, money and workforce that is available.

With the activities, plans and perspectives just mentioned we aim to work with UNESCO and to bring linguist from all over the world together with scholars from other fields, so as to ensure that the available knowhow and expertise is marshalled and best put to use for the cause of the very many languages that are out there, to the benefit of those languages that are endangered, those that go unrecorded, those that are not yet included in the Atlas of Endangered Languages.

Finally, and in addition, CIPL and with CIPL all the linguist of the world, have only one goal, and that is our wish for this very special year: recognition of what is called in the Girona Manifesto of 2011 ‘the right to use and to protect one’s own language’. And as the Manifesto goes on: ‘this right must be recognised as one of the fundamental human rights.

Wishing you all and ourselves a productive and successful International Year of Indigenous Languages!