

LETTER OF OPPOSITION TO ADOPTING ETHNOLOGUE'S LANGUAGE CODES FOR ISO 639-3

We, the undersigned researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, working with indigenous languages of Latin America, want to express our concern regarding the points that were raised by Dr. Hein van der Voort in the SSILA-Bulletin number 242 of August 22 of 2006, and show our support for the general position taken by Dr. van der Voort (full text is given below).

Dr. van der Voort describes the recent decision to adopt the Ethnologue's language codes as the reference standard for the languages of the world (also called ISO 639-3), and to place the SIL, the religious organization that sponsors the Ethnologue, in charge of setting up and maintaining the standard. This decision was not discussed with the world community of linguists. He questions the validity of this decision on ethical grounds (should a religious organization be in charge of such an effort?) and accuracy (while extensive, Ethnologue is also replete with errors). He proposes that efforts like UNESCO's Redbook of the Endangered Languages of the World be considered as an alternative to the SIL's Ethnologue.

Under the current arrangement, the only way scholars can contribute to improvements in the ISO 639-3 is by providing information to the SIL. This raises a central question for Dr. van der Voort: "Should we as scientists collaborate so directly with a proselytizing organization, lending it legitimacy and potentially contributing to its ultimate goal -- that of replacing indigenous cultures with a specific Western one?" As an ethical matter, we feel strongly that we should not. It is important to us that the ISO 639-3 standard and a possible permanent ISO 639-3 commission be clearly separated from the Ethnologue and the SIL in general, making it possible for any linguist to contribute to the ISO standard without contributing, directly or indirectly, to the religious goals of the SIL.

Therefore, we request that the current state of affairs with respect to the ISO 639-3 be reviewed, and that another, purely academic institution (possibly a committee or commission to be created) be responsible for maintaining and revising the ISO list of languages and their codes. The academic commission of SSILA assigned to evaluate proposals for changes to the survey of South America may serve as an example for other regions, and some coordination of regional commissions could be established in order to assure similar criteria and standards. Such a structure would allow all scientists to participate freely, and while it would certainly be a time-consuming project, the final product will be also a more reliable and sensible one.

With this motion, we join with linguists and others working in Latin America and other parts of the world, and invite others who share this view to make this position clear in their local academic associations and to start a worldwide discussion about a possible different solution for the ISO 639-3.

Sincerely,

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*** SSILA BULLETIN ***

An Information Service for SSILA Members

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-->> --Correspondence should be directed to the Editor-- <<--

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242.1 Correspondence

* Problems with the Ethnologue

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>From Hein van der Voort (hvoort@...)

25 July 2006:

Last year the International Standardization Organization (ISO) decided to adopt the Ethnologue's language codes as the reference standard for the languages of the world, called ISO 639-3. The responsibility for setting up the standard was in fact given to the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) (see SSILA Bulletin #227, 16 August 2005, and SSILA Newsletter, April 2006, p.16). This decision was not discussed with the wider linguistic community.

Why should a missionary organization like SIL be given the control of the universal standard for linguistic reference?

One reason is the fact that SIL has developed the Ethnologue, which is a highly useful reference tool. The good thing about the Ethnologue is that it represents the most complete survey of the languages of the world that exists today.

However, the Ethnologue is filled with errors, at least as far as South America is concerned. With regard to the 50 languages of the region where I work, the Guaporé region of Bolivia and Brazil, these errors include languages being represented as dialects, dialects represented as languages, languages attributed to the wrong family or stock, living languages declared dead,

languages omitted entirely, and countless alternative names applied incorrectly or to more than one language.

SIL has, indeed, set up a procedure to correct and improve the information that forms the basis for the ISO standard. Linguists with documentable knowledge have been invited to submit their corrections on special forms that are to be evaluated for the Americas by an independent committee of SSILA members. This procedure will also improve the quality of the data contained in the Ethnologue. But why is the existing information in the Ethnologue not subjected to the same scrutiny as the corrections that will be submitted to the SSILA committee?

There are alternatives to the Ethnologue, in particular the ideologically neutral UNESCO website in Tokyo for the Red Book of Endangered Languages (http://www.tooyoo.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/Redbook/SAmerica/SA_index.cgi).

Granted, the Red Book's database is still not complete (the important sections on Brazil and North America are not yet activated). But at least the information it does contain is reliable and comprehensive, and it deserves to be developed.

Perhaps another reason SIL was chosen is because the ISO Institute was not aware of any of these issues, since it is not specialized with regard to language and linguistics. They seem to have handed over the controls to the first organization that was pointed out to them. I can't recall any preceding discussion of this ISO decision at all.

The central issue I raise here is an ethical one: should we as scientists collaborate so directly with a proselytizing organization, lending it legitimacy and potentially contributing to its ultimate goal -- that of replacing indigenous cultures with a specific Western one?

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[To be fair, the editorial staff of the Ethnologue has asked for help from the linguistics community in identifying factual errors of any sort that appear in the publication, including misclassifications and outdated information on numbers of speakers and their locations. Updates and suggestions can be sent to Ethnologue_Editor@... --Ed.]