

# Language rights

Jo-Ann Q. Maglipon

Every single day one language disappears. There are 7,000 living languages today but in 25 years 90 percent of these will disappear. Less than 10,000 people speak 75 percent of these languages, and because those numbers do not speak economic gain, those languages will disappear.

These statistics alarm Cees Hamelink, professor at the University of Amsterdam, specialist in international communication, author of four books on the subject, including last year's *The Ethics of Cyberspace*. But why the alarm? What possible larger meaning can there be in losing 90 percent of 7,000 languages, 75 percent of which are spoken only by 10,000 people?

It means the world, he says. Language is culture, you kill language, you kill culture.

And, as one understands it: In so doing, you erase whole histories and bury entire stories the richness of which the world loses forever. You become party to declaring one culture inferior to another and therefore expendable. You set up one dominant culture and one dominant language which becomes, as language has in world conquests of the past, a tool to subjugate.

In the end, Hamelink says, the disappearance of diverse languages is the disappearance of diverse cultures. And such is the importance of language that as early as 1948 the United Nations protected it by declaring linguistic genocide, or the use of state violence to prohibit a people from using their language, a crime.

Today, he rues, that linguistic genocide is happening still. Except that now the perpetrators are far more sophisticated and in fact highly welcome in many parts of the world: media conglomerates. These conglomerates do not produce the cultural products, they produce the audiences that will buy the cultural products. Of course the products, to be bought, must then advertise with them. Already, advertising has become a \$500B market.

It is a market that will grow particularly faster if the world, abandoning the thousand other languages, begins speaking globalised media's one chosen language.

Media conglomerates are already buying up everything now, Hamelink warns. Book titles, film titles, the lot of which will come under tough Intellectual Property Rights sanctions. A benign development on the face of it, protection for idea and content, but as events have shown us, he says, "It's gone beyond that."

Conglomerates, Hamelink says, have taken language out of culture and put it under trade. From the arena of public domain, cultural products have been made to fall under private copyright. At the least, he says, "Everything will be more expensive in the next years." Yes, even Shakespeare and Mozart.