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The value of a language[1]

Christian Lehmann
University of Erfurt

While the notion VALUE OF A LANGUAGE is not established in linguistic theory, evaluation of languages has occurred both inside the discipline and in practical contexts. It is the aim of this article to provide a theoretical foundation for this notion. To this end, the relevant components of the notion of value are examined and then applied to the evaluation of languages. The discussion considers arguments and evidence that have been adduced in the literature and tries to systematize them. The conclusion is that a rational discussion of the value of a language in different respects is possible, although given the intrinsic value of every language as such, linguistics cannot be used to justify a declaration of the superfluity of a language.

Keywords: language evaluation, language maintenance, linguistic ethics

1. Introduction

The problem of the value of a language is at the crossroads of several disciplines and has ethical, sociological and economic aspects. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the notion VALUE OF A LANGUAGE on the basis of a theory of language. Its contribution does not lie in new data or new analyses of those data. The data adduced are all quoted from published sources and fulfill the function of rendering a theoretical argument graphic, which should be useful for non-specialists, and specialists may use the data to convince others. The discussion reviews arguments that have been advanced in the evaluation of languages. What the present article seeks to do is to systematize those arguments and provide a theoretical foundation for them. This has not been done before, as far as I am

aware. Thus, the text addresses not only professional linguists, but anybody concerned with the value of languages.

The notion "value of a language" is not too familiar in general linguistics or linguistic theory, but is rather well established in sociolinguistics, especially in multilingualism research, and in applied linguistics, especially in foreign language teaching. Most of the relevant literature focuses on the value of a language for the individual (de Swaan 2001), and much of it is limited to economic aspects (Dalmazzone 1999). From a political perspective, the value of a language is an important issue in multilingual communities, and it is therefore little wonder that much of the relevant research proceeds from the European Union (European Commission 1996) and Canada (Breton 1999). Here I will try and take a broader perspective, inspired by the ongoing concern with the documentation and preservation of endangered languages.

Much of the following discussion is driven by the question "why should we care for a disappearing language?" It is true that the attitude of many linguists towards that question is tinged with romantic yearning for the primitive and exotic (cf. Lehmann 1998, de Swaan 2004).[2] Seeking a rational answer to the question of the value of a language is a task for linguistic theory. But whether rational considerations are relevant when arguing with political and economic decision-makers is a different issue. And on the other hand, it will be conceded that value judgements are not entirely rational. The business of linguists is embedded in their responsibility to the society and the world in which they live.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 defines the notion of value and explains the dimensions of analysis in the application of the notion to a concrete field such as languages. Section 3 reviews some positions that have been adopted in the history of linguistics and discusses critically some principles underlying those positions. Sections 4 and 5 then take up the two central dimensions of the value concept, viz. the parameter of evaluation and the evaluator, unfold them and apply them to the analysis of the value of a language.

2. The notion of value

In philosophy and politics values are held to be things such as a family home, a prestigious car, honesty or full employment, which is a kind of shorthand for saying that these things may be evaluated positively by certain people according to certain

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[2] This is about the only sound point in de Swaan (2004), which is otherwise a polemic pamphlet against what the author calls "linguistic sentimentalism". Not once does he mention the active and brutal suppression of the use of minority languages that has happened and is happening in many countries; and instead he prefers to concentrate on a fiction where his favorite enemies, the linguists, urge minority language communities to maintain their traditional language "against their will, if needs be" (p. 571) with "silly" (p. 572) arguments about a connection between cultural and linguistic diversity. De Swaan does not consider multiculturalism a value (p. 573) and does not even shun away from assertions such as "English … the language .. that has the highest percentage of multilingual speakers" (p. 577) and "it is improbable that the confrontation with English, or with any other world-language, is the main factor in the disappearance of minor languages." (p. 575) The idea that a language may constitute a value never enters the author's mind.

parameters for certain purposes (cf. Regenbogen 1999: §2). Thus, the notion of value is secondary to the notion of evaluating something.

EVALUATION itself is a complex relational notion that involves a number of relata. The explicandum is the following proposition:

Evaluator E assigns value V to object O on parameter M for purpose P.

This entails that the RELATIVITY of values is built into the definition. A value is relative to each of the relata of the evaluation:

a. For object O to have value V is not an either-or issue, but a matter of degree and of hierarchical position relative to other objects.
b. O has different values along different parameters M.
c. E is a person or group, and V depends on E, which means O with its properties has such-and-such a value for E.
d. V depends on E's purpose, because O with its properties may serve one purpose, but not another.

In the following sections, these components of the evaluation will be discussed in turn.

2.1 Evaluation parameters

A PARAMETER is a property or aspect of an object which can vary and thus assume different values on a particular dimension. It may be a continuum (i.e. it can be measured against a scale) or a vector with discrete values. Typically, the scale extends between two opposite poles so that anything that the property in question can reasonably be predicated of may be placed on a position between the two poles and, consequently, relative to other things on the same scale. The temperature of an object is a simple example.

Measurement is the objective basis of evaluation. This so-to-speak neutral evaluation may be done by a non-human device, for instance a thermometer. The values assigned by such objective procedures may be called MEASURED VALUES. However, evaluation proper transcends measurement. It involves a quality judgement on certain positions or sections of the scale in question. Such judgements depend on the aims of the evaluator, to which we return in Section 2.3. A certain value that was measured for an object on a certain parameter will be good if it fits the evaluator's goals, and the object itself will accordingly be evaluated positively. The result is a QUALITATIVE VALUE assigned to the object. For instance, if I want to use the sauna for its normal purpose, a temperature of 90 degrees Celsius may be a positive value. If instead my purpose is to sleep in the sauna, then that temperature will be bad, and instead a temperature of 18 degrees Celsius may be good.

As the example illustrates, those properties of things that prove relevant in their evaluation and constitute, thus, the basis for a choice are often not absolute, objective properties but, instead, properties that result from the relation of things to human beings. In other words, they are functional properties like, e.g., beauty or usefulness.

2.2.Goal-orientation

The notions of value and goal are inextricably interwoven. On the one hand, my goals inform my value judgements. If I subordinate certain actions and means to a certain goal, that means that the goal itself has a value for me. On the other hand, assigning values to things fulfills a function in selecting one thing rather than another and, more generally, in orienting ourselves in life. The association of a certain measured value with a certain qualitative value may be stable for an individual or a society over a certain period. The qualitative value once assigned may then be taken for granted as a standard in individual choices and decisions. The value may thus be hypostatized to the status of an abstract object (as mentioned at the beginning of Section 2), as a goal to be pursued by the individual or the society (Regenbogen 1999: 1743).

Everything has more than one property. It may consequently be assigned measured values on different parameters, and each of these measured values may be associated with a qualitative value. For instance, good from an economic point of view means cheap, good from an esthetic point of view means beautiful, good from a practical point of view means useful, good from an emotional point of view means pleasurable. To the extent that these parameters are mutually independent, something may be good in one respect without being good in another. If I have to choose between a beautiful thing and a cheap thing and I opt for the beautiful thing, that means that I value beauty more highly than economy. More generally: at the level of a single parameter, a hierarchy among objects is created by the fact that measured values are associated with different qualitative values. At a higher level, the parameters themselves are subject to evaluation; and this is what creates a VALUE HIERARCHY (cf. Regenbogen 1999: §5).

My value hierarchy is again a consequence of my goals. As an example, consider the goals that my children should be successful in their professional lives and that they should integrate themselves into our traditional society. We may take these values for granted, although they are doubtless choices motivated by even higher goals.[3] Given the first goal, my children have to speak that language which is needed to be successful in professional life, which is the dominant language in our society. Given the second goal, my children have to speak the traditional language of our community. Each of the two languages has a value on a certain parameter, but the parameters are in conflict. If I position individual success higher on the hierarchy than social integration, I will choose to speak the dominant language and to neglect our traditional minority language in communicating with my children. The example will be taken up in Section 5.1. Here it serves to show that value conflicts are resolved with respect to a value hierarchy.

In such situations, things that are strictly incommensurable are ordered on a single value scale. Of course, people are often reluctant to accept such choices between incommensurable items and reject the alternative. Well-known examples include the sinister question posed to a conscientious objector what he would do if the enemy attacked his mother. Here pacifism and parental piety are projected onto one value scale. The difficulty of making such forced choices has to do with the fact that they are

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[3] See Thomas (1998:582) for a distinction between instrumental and final values.

highly abstract, i.e. they are not embedded in specific actions taking place in specific situations under specific conditions and pursuing specific goals, all of which are definitory conditions for rational value judgements.

In our society, the single scale on which most values are projected is, of course, money. Money has increasingly become the universal standard. Practically any moral value can be compensated for by money, as instanced in extortion, kidnapping and even insurance policies, where the value of a human life is assessed as an amount of money. While one may abhor this situation on ethical grounds, it is practical from a methodological point of view, because it facilitates enormously a quantitative assessment of the values attributed by people to different things, including languages.

2.3. Evaluation

Given a certain object that holds a certain measured value on a certain parameter, then that value constitutes a qualitative value for a certain evaluator to the extent that the object with this measured value serves the goals that the evaluator pursues. And to that extent, the object itself will have a positive value.[4] Evaluation is then the assignment of a qualitative value to a thing.

Human actions are in a TELEONOMIC hierarchy, i.e. a given action may be a means towards some goal and may itself be achieved by subservient acts or processes. An evaluation may be considered rational to the extent that it has a position in a teleonomic hierarchy and that it is based on measurement. Many value decisions are not rational by either of these criteria. The choice of the highest goals (or values) is, by definition, not guided by anything. And sometimes values are assigned on a purely emotional basis. Therefore science typically tries to stay away from evaluation and to restrict itself to measurement. If here we talk about the value of a language, we will at some point have to transcend the compass of linguistic science and make choices based on convictions.

Since a value is the product of an evaluation, it is contingent upon the circumstances of the particular evaluation act:
a. The value of a thing correlates, ceteris paribus, inversely with the number of exemplars of the same kind that one already possesses.
b. The same thing is valued more highly if it is lost than if it is gained.

The second finding again confirms the partly irrational character of values, and we find ourselves in a situation where rational argument reaches its limits (cf. Betsch 2005).

2.4. Evaluators

Different people pursue different goals so that an objective evaluation of a thing is generally impossible. Qualitative evaluation is necessarily subjective. If the pursuit of A's

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[4] In philosophical discussion, such a characterization would probably be subsumed under *lebensweltliche Verankerung* (roughly, 'anchorage in the world of our life') of values as proposed in hermeneutics. It is indeed assumed here that (qualitative) values do not exist independently of human beings pursuing goals. They are not given a priori, but are the result of human evaluations.

goals involves damage to some C that belongs to B, then a common apologetic strategy for A is to argue that C is of no value. Examples can be found in the history of colonialism, for instance in Christian mission, e.g. the burning of the Mayan codices by bishop Landa in Mayapán, Yucatán in 1562. Landa asserted explicitly that these codices were of no value.

Needless to say, the admitted subjectivity of values does not license such acts. Assume that my neighbor considers something a value, but I do not:

a. From an ethical point of view, the Kantian categorical imperative induces me to be respectful of my neighbor's values; for I myself have things that I value highly, and for their conservation I depend on his good will and respect for them.
b. From a sociopsychological point of view, I know what it feels like to value highly an object that means nothing to others. Through human empathy, I can realize that it makes sense for my neighbor to attribute such a high value to the object in question. This induces me to support him in preserving his values.

The conclusion from this consideration is that OTHER PEOPLES' VALUES ARE VALUES and that any act which negatively affects something that somebody else values is an aggressive act.

The issue of the value of a certain object is partly empirical, partly normative. The empirical question is what value evaluators actually assign to the object. The normative question is what value they ought to assign to it. The normative question might be considered to be an ethical and, thus, philosophical question. I will here not dodge such normative questions, but take the position that those values that philosophers may treat as objective values need to be justified by considerations of what is in the interest of mankind. This level of interest will be dealt with in Section 5.3.

3. Evaluation of languages

In trying to define the rational basis for an argument about the value of a language, one looks for analogies. Are there any other aspects of human life comparable to a language that may be evaluated? Culture as a whole comes into play here, and particular aspects of non-material culture like religion that have something in common with language. However, such parallels turn out not to be helpful. I will here take the position that human language is unique and that apart from the general theory of values set out in the preceding section, there are no general considerations on other cultural items that carry over to language.

3.1 Superiority and inferiority of languages

The basic unreflective attitude towards the languages that a person encounters is naïve LANGUAGE CHAUVINISM. This simply means: my own language is the only one that really deserves the name; everything else is just gibberish. Naïve language chauvinism has been with us since the Greeks called all Non-Greeks *bárbaroi* on the basis of the noises they made when trying to speak. In the Spanish-speaking world, it is customary to reserve the term *lengua* for Spanish and to call all other languages spoken in the country *idiomas*

or even *dialectos*. Not seldom, language chauvinism has been given academic respectability by pseudoscientific arguments. For instance, members of the Académie Française like François Charpentier (1683) and public writers such as Antoine de Rivarol (1783) have argued repeatedly that French is the best language in the world.[5]

Up to about 1900, the evaluation of languages was at about this level of theoretical refinement. Typologists of the 19th century (e.g. Steinthal & Misteli 1893) defined general standards for a well-formed language which happened to coincide with the structure of Indo-European (especially ancient Indo-European) languages, applied these to the assessment of diverse languages of the world and found out that practically all languages except those of Indo-European origin were deficient.

In the 20th century, argumentation became more sophisticated. It is now generally assumed that there are no rational grounds for assigning different values to languages in general. The argument goes that, since there are more than enough languages in the world and any language is as good as any other, no harm is done if a couple of them disappear. Whether the language that becomes extinct is called Itzá Maya or Spanish makes no difference in principle. Given certain outward circumstances that we cannot control, it just so happens that the victim is Itzá Maya rather than Spanish. This cynical attitude is incompatible with the version of the categorical imperative proposed in Section 2.4.

3.2. The essential equality of languages

It is apparent that value judgements on languages have been made throughout the history of mankind and of linguistic science without sufficient reflection on their basis. The following is an attempt at building such a rational basis. Every single language is an instantiation of human language, i.e. something that distinguishes human beings from animals. Language is the unlimited creation of interpersonal meanings, i.e. signs. This activity serves the two equally high goals of communication and cognition. At this level of abstraction, we may ask what the value of human language as such is. The answer will depend on two conditions, namely the role of communication and cognition in the conditio humana and the indispensability of language in the pursuit of these goals. As for the first condition, it is generally assumed that both communication – communion and exchange with fellow human beings with respect to how we feel and think – and cognition – understanding the world surrounding us – are constitutive of the conditio humana. This means that the more communication and cognition are furthered, the more dignity human life has. As for the second condition, other activities like dancing, playing, contemplation may partly serve the same goals, but none does so as comprehensively and perfectly as language. The answer to the question concerning the value of language for mankind and, consequently, for every human being is thus simple: LANGUAGE IS CONSTITUTIVE OF HUMANITY; without it, we would be less human. The full impact of this statement can be appreciated if one thinks of "wild children" like the German Kaspar Hauser or the US American Genie, or again of people who lose their speech as a result of a stroke.

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[5] Remember Rivarol's (1783[1964]: 90) famous slogan *Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français* 'that which is not clear is not French'.

Human language only exists in the form of individual historical languages. Individual languages, in principle, inherit the values assigned to human language. However, languages are variant means in communication and cognition. An individual may switch between different languages, and a whole community may shift from one language to another. Consequently the question of whether all languages have the same value obviously depends on whether they are functionally equal. This question is beset with both ideological and objective problems. The former have to do with occidental arrogance, racism and perpetual ignorance among the general public. The latter have to do with the possibilities and past achievements of linguistic science when confronted with the complexity of a natural language. Before we try to approach the question of the equality of all languages from a scientific point of view, it should be made clear that the first kind of problem is not to be taken lightly. The scientist can measure certain properties of different languages, compare them and ascertain that a particular language performs higher on a given parameter than another language; for instance, it has a more complex case system or is used in more varied modes of communication. However, he selects and hierarchizes such parameters of comparison because he thinks they are relevant for a certain purpose, and this decision may ultimately be based on ideological convictions.

Turning now to ways in which the issue of the equality of all languages may be approached objectively, the question is by what criteria we can determine how a language performs in furthering communication and cognition. I cannot treat this question systematically here and thus must resort to giving some illustrative examples. One approach is to determine how much a society actually USES a given language for those purposes. Languages differ enormously in this respect. For instance, most languages are not used to do science in the western understanding of this notion, simply because they are not written. Most languages are not used in formal education, for the same reason. Some languages are not used in written communication because their speech community is principally not engaged in such activities. In other cases, the reason is that their speech community employs another language for such purposes. In any case, if the entire field of communication and cognition is split up into pragmatic domains,[6] then it is quite clear that some languages are used in more domains than others. For instance, the speech community of the Mayas of Yucatan (Mexico) uses Spanish in everything having to do with law and uses Maya for this purpose only on those rare occasions when Spanish juridical texts are translated into Maya. More extreme cases of speech communities restricting the use of their traditional language are mentioned in Section 5.2.

The use of a language in a certain pragmatic domain naturally contributes to the extension of those parts of its system that immediately serve that specific function. For instance, the Maya language is much poorer in juridical vocabulary and phraseology than the Spanish language. Therefore the uses that a language is put to DO concern the nature of the language as a repository of ideas. However, languages are flexible and expandable in this respect. If a society decides to use a certain language in a new pragmatic domain, then the relevant resources of the language will quickly be expanded.

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[6] as in the ethnography of communication; cf. Saville-Troike (1987)

This enrichment will mainly concern vocabulary and phraseology and will hardly affect the linguistic system, viz. the sound system, the morphology and the syntax with their categories and rules. If one takes the latter to be characteristic of a language and constitutive of its individuality, then the basic nature of a language is very little affected by the uses it is put to.

This leads us to an alternative approach to the question of whether all languages are equal, which consists in analyzing their SYSTEMS and determining the kinds of conceptual distinctions they enable their speakers to make. The issue here is whether properties of a language system could possibly be relevant to its evaluation. I will return in Section 4.3 to some concrete examples of the cognitive richness of languages. Here I will approach the question at an abstract and general level. Evaluative judgements on languages by laymen and by nineteenth-century typologists have one thing in common: languages that are disqualified are primitive; highly valued languages are civilized. It is clear that for both groups of evaluators, prejudices concerning the state of civilization of western vs. exotic peoples prevailed over an objective appraisal of the language systems. Supposing we can free ourselves from such prejudices, the question is: do languages actually differ on a scale from primitive to elaborate?

Suppose we reduce this criterion to the degree of complexity of the language system. We then face a methodological problem: General linguistics is prepared to compare the degree of complexity of selected subsystems of the language system. For instance, there is no doubt that Spanish has a simpler phonological system than English and a simpler morphological system than Latin. However, what has proved impossible up to now is to assess the overall complexity of a language by counting up complexities of its subsystems. The most we can say is that if a language is simple in each of its subsystems, then it is really simple.

In fact there are languages that are simple by this criterion, viz. pidgin languages. We may feel justified in considering them primitive because their speakers do not value them themselves. In the case of pidgin languages, lack of formal complexity coincides with extreme limitation in terms of the range of pragmatic domains in which the language is employed. Pidgin languages are really not full-fledged languages. Incidentally, the same holds for moribund languages, i.e. languages which are no longer used on a daily basis.

As soon as we leave out pidgin and moribund languages and focus on languages that fulfill the whole range of pragmatic functions required in their speech community, then we have to say that every language on earth has what has been called EFFABILITY (Katz 1972: 18-24), i.e. the capacity to express everything that one may want to express.[7]

Suppose furthermore that our methodology suffices to assess the overall complexity of linguistic systems and that we find out that some languages are actually simpler than others. On the basis of present linguistic intuitions, we may expect that Indonesian will come out as one of the simplest languages in the world, while English

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[7] Again, this is not to be taken as a doctrine, but as an empirical generalization. There are voices in the field to the contrary. For instance, Everett (2005) holds that the Pirahã (Amazonas) language system is simpler than that of any other known language and that this corresponds to restricted demands on cognition, communication and culture.

has good chances to be near the pole of extreme complexity.[8] We may then look back and question the validity of the criterion we worked with in the first place. Why should complexity be a virtue and simplicity a defect? After all, a simple language is much easier to learn than a complex one. So, since every language including Indonesian has effability, practical considerations would lead us to value Indonesian more highly than English.

The upshot of this discussion is that no rational criteria are known that would allow us to set up a general hierarchy of languages in terms of their value. All we can do is examine the values of a language at some lower level of differentiation. We will take up two of the components of evaluation treated in Section 2, viz. the parameters and the evaluators, asking the following questions:

a. What are the possible values of a language along different evaluation parameters?

b. What are the possible values of a language at different levels of interest, i.e from the individual up to the global level?

These questions will be taken up in the following two sections.

4. Parameters of evaluation of a language

There are as many parameters according to which an object may be evaluated as the object has properties. Some of the parameters relevant to language depend on a primary distinction between the system and the text. Naturally, texts can incorporate values that have nothing to do with language; here we have to concentrate on the purely linguistic aspects of texts. The following parameters have been used frequently in assessing the value of a language:

a. The PRACTICAL VALUE of a language concerns the extent to which it is useful in life. It can be assessed in terms of the kinds of people that the language allows me to communicate with and the kinds of cognitive and communicative problems that it allows me to solve. This parameter is not sensitive to the system-text distinction.

b. The CULTURAL VALUE of a language is bound up with the value of the culture to which it gives tongue. This relates both to the text and to the system – chiefly to the lexicon.

c. The EPISTEMIC VALUE of a language relates to the thoughts and concepts coded in its system.

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[8] If one wants to see these intuitions backed up, here are some relevant empirical observations: *a)* English: twelve vowels, five diphthongs, complex onsets and rhymes, complex accent placement, complex morphophonology, person/number and tense on the verb, more than 160 irregular verbs, copula = verb of existence ≠ 'have', obligatory definite and indefinite article, SIMPLE PERSONAL PRONOUN SYSTEM, word order partly left-branching, partly right-branching, highly complex non-finite constructions, Latin, Greek, French loans, least regular alphabetic orthography in the world; *b)* Indonesian: six vowels, no diphthongs, simple onsets, simple rhymes, simple accent placement, simple morphophonology, voice on the verb, no irregular verbs, no copula, verb of existence = 'have', optional definite article, COMPLEX PERSONAL PRONOUN SYSTEM, right-branching word order, no finiteness distinction, Sanskrit and Arabic loans, regular phonemic orthography. The one area where Indonesian is decidedly more complex has been highlighted; several areas of about equal complexity (e.g. word formation) have been omitted.

d. The ESTHETIC VALUE of a language relates to the beauty of its texts.[9]

The following subsections will discuss these parameters in turn.

4.1 The practical value of a language

Many people hold the view that one language is just as good as any other. If a language is lost, then this does not entail that the speech community ceases to speak; they just use a different language. So no harm is done to anybody. This is the INSTRUMENTAL VIEW of language, where a language is like a tool for a given aim; and any tool that serves the aim is as good as any other. We will start by taking this perspective here in order to see how far it carries us.

One of the properties of a language that lends it practical value is its PRESTIGE.[10] Much of the prestige of a language is derivative from other values. Already Libanius (Or. 1, 214), a Greek sophist and rhetorician of the 4th cent. AD in Antioch, comments on the ousting of Greek by Latin and evinces a clear understanding of the fact that this is mainly due to "power and wealth", as he says. The same goes for the role of French from the 17th up to the 20th century; see the contemporary testimonies quoted in Hagège (1987: Chapter VI) and Hagège (1992: 97-108). And the same is true of the role of English in our times. The prestige of this language does not derive from its own beauty nor from the value of the culture that it expresses, but exclusively from the power and wealth that it represents and promises.

There are, however, other factors that may contribute to the prestige of a language and that are less extrinsic. Most of the languages in the world are only used for oral communication. A language that is used in written communication has a higher prestige than one that is not. The above-mentioned deprecation of vernacular languages as *dialectos* in the Spanish-speaking world is essentially based on this criterion: if these "dialects" cannot even be written down, they do not have the status of languages.

The existence of a grammar and a dictionary of a language is another factor intimately associated with literacy. A language can serve for written communication only if users can rely on a grammar (including an orthography) and a dictionary. Recently, linguists have published more or less comprehensive descriptions of many hitherto unknown languages. However, in many cases these achievements remain inside the professional domain and are never taken advantage of by the speech community. Again, in the judgement of outsiders, an idiom that does not even have a grammar to it is not a real language. The weight of this judgement is greatly aggravated by the fact that "grammar" means something different for the layman and for the specialist. The linguist distinguishes between GRAMMAR$_1$ as the systematicity that is intrinsic to every language, and GRAMMAR$_2$ that is the product of the linguistic description of grammar$_1$. Thus for the linguist every language in the world has a grammar in the essential sense – grammar$_1$. For the layman, however, a language does not have a grammar$_1$ unless it has a

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[9] One could certainly form the notion of the esthetic value of a language system; but I doubt it would be clearly distinguishable from its epistemic value.

[10] The prestige that a language enjoys in some social environment comes under the category of language attitudes, which is the canonical object of study of sociolinguistics.

grammar$_2$. Given this premise, the conclusion that a linguistic variety that does not have a grammar is not a real language is fully justified. Therefore one of the most important things that linguists concerned with the maintenance of a language can do is publish a grammar and a dictionary of it that members of the speech community can use and boast.

4.2.The cultural value of a language

A language is a key to the culture of its speech community. This has been especially important in the case of extinct languages or of earlier stages of modern languages. Many people want to know about life in ancient times, and even more people want to know how their own ancestors lived. The way to learn about this is to study those ancient languages. This was the main driving force behind the prestige that the classical languages enjoyed in humanistic education in Europe.

Ritual languages deserve to be singled out for their particular value. Religious practice is bound up with the use of appropriate language, and very often only one language is admissible. In the Catholic Church, Latin was the only ritual language for many centuries, long after it ceased to be used in daily communication. The situation of Coptic in the Coptic church, of Old Church Slavonic in the Orthodox Church, and of Sumerian in Babylonian religious practice is similar. In several of these cases, the only reason a language survived is because it was indispensable in religious practice.

Nowadays, language maintenance generally means programs of bilingual and bicultural education. The coordination is important. People understand that the purpose of saving an endangered language is not just keeping a system of communication alive. The language codes, interprets and expresses the culture. A person that has learnt to communicate in two languages can live in two cultures. Such people do not only experience a personal enrichment but are an important force in keeping peace in multiethnic societies.[11]

4.3.The epistemic value of a language

A language embodies a treasure of ideas and of solutions to problems of communication and cognition. Some grammatical categories are widespread, others are areally restricted, yet others are unique to one language (Plank 1998ff) and, therefore, an object of intellectual curiosity. In the following, I will more or less arbitrarily select some examples of lexical and grammatical properties of languages that may seem instructive for a speaker of a western European language.

4.3.1.Vocabulary

Languages may have an enormously fine internal differentiation for a concept: Yup'ik (an Eskimo language) has 14 words designating kinds of shoes and boots (Mithun 2004: 125f). They may have amazingly specific concepts, such as Navajo *-tsǫǫz*, which means

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[11] Camartin (1985) is a passionate pleading for cultural diversity on the example of Romansh.

'for something that has been previously inflated or swollen to become flat and wrinkled upon deflation, as a car tire that loses its air', or Yup'ik *mege-* 'to not want to go back to one's undesirable former living situation' (Mithun 2004: 126). Many languages have a process of incorporation of a noun stem into a verb by which they form many imaginative concepts, such as Yucatec Maya in (1)-(2) (cf. Lehmann & Verhoeven 2005):

(1) a. *hoy- t'àan* *kaxan- t'àan*
    dig.out-word search-word
    'interrogate' 'strike up conversation'

  b. *hay- t'àan* *ki'- t'àan*
    strew-word delicious-word
    'announce' 'praise'

(2) *mech'- chi'* *séeb- chi'*
    bend-mouth fast-mouth
    'sneer'   'blab out'

Such formations are a source of inspiration just as much as the poetic metaphors so highly valued in our society.

4.3.2. Empathy

Human beings have empathy with other human beings. They have less empathy with animals and no empathy with stones. Some languages reflect in their structure fine gradations of empathy,[12] the principle being always that finer grammatical distinctions are made for empathic entities than for anempathic entities. Number marking on nouns is a good example. Japanese has a plural suffix, but it only uses it for human nouns, as in (3). Nouns for animals and inanimate things, as in (4), do not distinguish numbers.

(3) a. *watasi* – *watasi- tati*
    I   I-PLURAL
    'I'   – 'we'

  b. *kodomo* – *kodomo- tati*
    child child-PLURAL
    'child' – 'children'

(4) a. *inu* 'dog, dogs'

  b. *hon* 'book, books'

Here the grammar of a language reflects a general principle of cognition which says that we make finer distinctions for objects that are closer to us, both literally and metaphorically.

  The Yuchi language (Wagner 1933: 324-330) has an elaborate paradigm of third person pronouns whose use depends on the sex of the speaker and which mark such properties of the referent as his sex, kin relation and relative generation with respect to

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[12] Much of the relevant literature uses the term "animacy", as e.g. Comrie (1981: Chapter 9), building on the seminal work by Silverstein (1976).

the speaker. However, it does this only for members of the Yuchi tribe. For non-members, the whole paradigm shrinks into one form, which is also used for non-human higher animates. This grammatical subsystem is remarkable in more than one respect:

a. the distinction between tribe members and non-members is incorporated into the grammar;
b. social distinctions are reserved for tribe members;
c. empathy is subdivided in such a way that tribe members are the top category and non-members belong together with other higher animates at the second level.

This example also serves to show the importance that a people may attach to distinguishing themselves from their environment (cf. Section 5.2).

4.3.3. Control

Control is a fundamental parameter in our conception of situations. Whether a given participant in a situation controls it or not, or is even affected by the situation, makes an essential difference in our assessment of what has happened in the situation.[13] However, no traditional grammar of any European language speaks of control. Grammarians had not become aware of the role of this parameter in linguistic structure, and it was not until they had taken a thorough look at languages outside Western Europe that they found out about this. The Georgian language (Caucasus) shows one implementation of this feature.

(5) a. *k'ac-ma*   *išira*
         man-ACT   cry:AOR.3.SG
         'The man cried.'

    b. *k'ac-i*   *mok'vda*
         man-INACT   die: AOR.3.SG
         'The man died.'

    c. *k'ac-ma*   *k'al-i*   *mok'la*
         man- ACT   woman- INACT   kill: AOR.3. SG
         'The man killed the woman.' (Comrie 2001: 25)[14]

In (5c) we have a sentence with a transitive verb whose subject bears one case and whose direct object bears another case. This looks pretty much like the nominative and accusative of more familiar languages. In (5a) the subject still bears the same case as the subject of (5c), which appears to confirm our first impression, but note that the subject of (5b) bears the same case as the direct object of (5c). These cases are not nominative and accusative at all; they are the active and inactive cases. The subjects of (5a) and (5b) are marked differently because the verb of the former implies that its subject controls the situation, while the verb of the latter implies that its subject does not. In our culture, control in this very sense has an enormous importance, because it implies power and responsibility. In the Georgian language, the concept is built into the grammar.

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[13] The relevance of control for linguistic structure was first brought out in Givón (1975). Cf. also Comrie (1981: Chapter 3.1).
[14] Abbreviations: 3 third person, ACT active, AOR aorist, INACT inactive, SG singular.

4.3.4. Evidential

The evidential is a grammatical category comparable to mood in western European languages. It expresses the source of information the speaker has for his assertions (Aikhenvald 2005). Tariana (Vaupés, Colombia) distinguishes five evidentials by verbal suffixes

(6)   a.   *Juse   irda   di-manika-ka*
          Joe   football   3.SG.NF-play-(VIS)RECPST
          'Joe played football [I saw it]'

    b.   *Juse   irda   di-manika-mah-ka*
          Joe   football   3.SG.NF-play-NVIS-RECPST
          'Joe played football [I heard it]'

    c.   *Juse   irda   di-manika-nih-ka*
          Joe   football   3.SG.NF-play-INFR-RECPST
          'Joe played football [I infer it from visual evidence]'

    d.   *Juse   irda   di-manika-si-ka*
          Joe   football   3.SG.NF-play-ASSUM-RECPST
          'Joe played football [I infer it from general knowledge]'

    e.   *Juse   irda   di-manika-pida-ka*
          Joe   football   3.SG.NF-play-RPRT-RECPST
          'Joe played football [I was told]'[5]

The grammatical category of evidentiality is largely confined to the languages of the Americas, and it is instructive for our understanding of cognition and communication. Although forms of it can, on hindsight, also be found in some European languages, we would not have learnt about it had we not investigated non-European languages.

4.3.5. First person inclusive vs. exclusive

In most European languages, an utterance such as *we will go* is ambiguous because it leaves open whether the expression *we* is meant to include or exclude the hearer. Many languages outside Europe have a simple solution to the problem: within the category of first person plural, they have two forms, one called INCLUSIVE because it includes the hearer, the other called EXCLUSIVE (Corbett 2000). The pattern is illustrated by (7) from Malagassy (the language of Madagascar):

(7)   a.   *H-andeha   izahay*
          FUT-go   1PL.EXCL
          'We will go (but not you).'

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[5] Examples from Aikhenvald (2004: 2). Abbreviations: ASSUM: assumptive evidential; INFR: inferential evidential; NF: non-feminine; NVIS: non-visual evidential; RECPST: recent past; RPRT: reportative evidential; VIS: visual evidential.

b. *H- andeha isika*
   FUT-go   1.PL.INCL
   'We (including you) will go.'

This is another example where other languages make a useful distinction absent from our own.

4.3.6. Summary

Naturally, the principle of effability also allows us to say in English all those things that have been shown to be coded in the grammar of diverse languages. However, we generally do not say them since our grammar does not require it. And if such distinctions are not coded in the grammar, it is relatively cumbersome to express them. "Different languages allow speakers to specify different things with ease." (Mithun 2004:129)

At secondary and university level of education, teaching and learning a foreign language has some values on the different parameters discussed here. The epistemic value is, of course, to make students see that a language is not simply an inventory of labels for familiar things but an alternative view of the world. Students learn in an exemplary way how the world may be conceptualized by other people and how one can broaden one's own horizon by adopting those alternative perspectives on the world.

4.4. The esthetic value of a language

We are all familiar with prejudices about which language or dialect sounds beautiful and which sounds ugly. As long as one's own language or dialect always sounds beautiful, such judgements only evince the positive attitude of people toward their own language, i.e. naïve language chauvinism. However, sometimes the opinions of different speech communities converge on the beauty of one language. French is a case in point that I quote here without further discussion.

Such judgements should in principle be objectifiable. It is both possible to obtain majority judgements on the pleasantness of the sound of a language and to correlate properties of its phonological system with such judgements. However, instead of indulging in speculations at this point, let us look at the profit that a poet may draw from the phonological flexibility and adaptability of his language. Here are two examples from Homeric Greek:

(8) *aieì dè malakoîsi kaì haimulíoisi lógoisi*
    always however with_soft and flattering words
    thélgei
    she_enchants
    'She, however, always enchants him with soft and flattering words' (Hom. *Od.* I, 56f)

(9) *aûtis épeita pédonde kylíndeto lâas anaidḗs*
    again then to_ground it_rolls rock tricky
    'But then the tricky stone rolls down again to the ground.' (Hom. *Od.* 11, 598)

(8) is from the passage where Kalypso tries to keep Ulysses back on her island. The verses depict the sound of her words with unsurpassable onomatopoeia. (9) is from the myth of Sisyphus. Again the sound symbolism reflecting the movement described speaks directly to the imagination. Given effability, the Homeric epics can, of course, be translated into English. Not the least value of the Greek language lies in the fact that no translation can ever hope to bring out the poetic beauty of such verses.

5. Levels of interest

Given that a value can only be understood as relative to the evaluator, one way of systematizing the discussion is to distinguish levels at which evaluators are organized. Those distinguished here are the levels of the individual, the nation and humanity.

In principle, every individual and group of evaluators may take all the evaluation parameters of Section 4 into account. In practice, however, the parameters have different importance at different levels. For instance, what is of interest for the individual is first and foremost the practical value of a language, while the esthetic or epistemic qualities of a language will seldom play a role.

5.1 The value of a language for an individual

The individual has fundamentally an instrumental view of a language (cf. de Swaan 2001): what practical advantages will I have if I speak that language? If a person finds that a language is a necessary means to achieve his ends, then he will invest time and money to learn that language. This time and money can be saved to the extent that the person can achieve his goals in his native language. The value of one's native language can, thus, partly be assessed by how much it saves. Native speakers of English, for instance, tend to rely heavily on this advantage.

The language a child acquires as his mother tongue depends essentially on decisions taken by his parents. Most parents find it important that their child be happy and successful in life, and to the extent that they have a choice, they use such criteria to choose the languages they want their children to be taught. If more than one language comes into question, then in principle the child could learn all of them. Relevant decisions are then complicated by a number of incommensurable considerations. On the one hand, languages differ in the parameter on which they have value. Typically, the traditional language grants integration into the social group and cultural heritage, while the dominant language grants individual professional success. On the other hand, the simultaneous acquisition of more than one language by children often results in constant code switching and even mixture of the languages. This infringes upon principles of purism valued by the older generation, with the consequence that they do not motivate their children to speak the traditional language and sometimes even discourage them (Garrett 2004: 64f).

For the individual, one's native language is the primary means of understanding the world and maintaining social contact. It is normally the only medium that allows him full self-expression. When forced to use a foreign language, he feels handicapped or vulnerable. The German writer Thomas Mann spent most of the period of the Third

Reich in the U.S.A., supporting anti-nazi propaganda. He continued to write for a living; but although he could speak English, he never published anything in English. He did not feel that he could express himself in English to his own satisfaction.

5.2. The value of a language for a people

The identity of a social group is constructed as a symbolic system. Therefore its language is not only instrumental in the definition of this identity, but is, in fact, a central part of it (Bucholtz & Hall 2004). While the publications by French intellectuals on the superior nature of the French language mentioned in Section 3.1 could not prove what they purported to prove, they do show that at all times there have been people who hold their own language in high esteem.

Social groups shape and recognize their identity by the forms that such social activities as language take. The more important it is to maintain a social structure intact, the more important becomes the role of its language. Probably the most celebrated case of a language that played an essential role in defining national identity is Hebrew. Until the rise of Zionism at the end of the 19th century, the Jews did not have a common spoken language and used Hebrew only for ritual communication. The Zionist movement, however, recognized that national unity could only be achieved if they spoke a common language, more specifically the language which was inseparably associated with the national religion. They consequently revived Hebrew, which from the early 20th century restarted being used as a spoken language and then became the official language of the state of Israel.

The value of a language for the unity of its speech community is, of course, also recognized by its enemies. It is reliably reported that English-speaking authorities in North America and Australia took indigenous children away from their parents and forced them into boarding-schools, where they were forbidden on punishment to speak their native language with each other (Zepeda & Hill 1991: 138f). This was, in fact, a very efficient way of exterminating the native languages of these countries. Among the many things that one could say about this, one question is presently of interest: why did the Anglophone authorities want to extinguish the native languages? Obviously they felt threatened by them. The language of a social group is a tool that helps that group in organizing activities that are in their own interest, especially if people outside that group do not share those interests (cf. Dalmazzone 1999 on Irish).

The reverse conclusion is, of course, that any social group that does not want to submit to the hegemonic claims of a dominating group is well advised to cultivate their traditional language.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the national value of a language is often promoted not by a people as a whole but by a privileged social group. Those who most ardently defend the necessity of a national language for the identity of their nation are often people who happen to dominate the standard language and draw personal profit from it, as in the case of writers, for example, or people who would profit from it if everybody used the same language, as in the case of politicians (Silverstein 1996). It has been proved empirically (Kroskrity 2004: 509 et pass.) that persons who do belong to less privileged social groups and whose variety is not the

national standard often care very little about which language they speak and do not see a problem in shifting their language.

It seems natural to us that a speech community should value its traditional language. Research on endangered languages has, in fact, shown that the opposite situation is not so rare. A people whose language is despised by the dominant majority in the society learns that its own traditional language is worth nothing and begins to take a negative attitude towards it. It has been a commonplace in linguistic surveys of various regions that if such people are asked what their native language is, they disavow their traditional language and claim to be speakers of the dominant language. The Rama in Nicaragua are one of many examples (Craig 1987).[16]

Language loss is inseparable from other, socio-economic processes, and therefore difficult to reverse (Fishman 1991). The success of at least some efforts at language revitalization is the more remarkable. Manx, the Gaelic language of the Isle of Man, was still spoken by some 50 people from among a total population of 70,000 in the 1990s; today, it is moribund. However, the native speaker Brian Stowell has succeeded in reintroducing the language into school (Ramat 2005).

By the maxim that other peoples' values are values, the evident desire and serious effort of a social community to preserve its traditional language constitutes one of the most powerful arguments for the rest of the world to respect this wish and to support it to the extent that it does not conflict with other legitimate interests.[17] If a social community ceases to speak its language, it may lose its identity and dissolve. A functioning social community itself constitutes a high value which is very hard to create anew.

5.3. The value of a language for mankind

5.3.1. The uniqueness of a language

The evaluation parameters that are most relevant at the level of humanity are the epistemic and esthetic values of a language. In order to see why, we can hardly do better than quote Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836[1963]: 410):

> Vermöge des [...] Zusammenhangs des Einzelnen mit der ihn umgebenden Masse gehört, jedoch nur mittelbar und gewissermaßen, jede bedeutende Geistestätigkeit des ersteren zugleich auch der letzteren an. Das Dasein der Sprachen beweist aber, daß es auch geistige Schöpfungen gibt, welche ganz und gar nicht von einem

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[16] Thus, the value of a language in constituting the identity of its speech community is nothing that could be taken for granted, because "identities do not coexist in the kind of multicultural harmony marketed in the mass media and promoted by liberal education, in which physical, cultural, and linguistic specificities become interchangeable and equivalent differences. In reality, in situations of cultural contact, equal status is won, if at all, through bitter struggle. This fact is illustrated by ongoing efforts around the world to gain some form of official state recognition for the languages of people who have experienced subordination and oppression under colonial rule, nationalism, and global capitalism" (Bucholtz & Hall 2004:371; see the references adduced there).

[17] "People and groups have a generic right to realize their capacity for culture, and to produce, reproduce and change the conditions and forms of their physical, personal and social existence, so long as such activities do not diminish the same capacities of others." (Committee for Human Rights 1998)

Individuum aus auf die übrigen übergehen, sondern nur aus der gleichzeitigen Selbsttätigkeit aller hervorbrechen können. In den Sprachen also sind, da dieselben immer eine nationelle Form haben, die Nationen als solche eigentlich und unmittelbar schöpferisch.[18]

Summarizing, Humboldt claims (p. 411f) that:

sich in dieser [der Bildung der Sprachen] das Zusammenwirken der Individuen in einer sonst nicht vorkommenden Gestalt zeigt.[19]

The biunique association of a nation with a language is typical of 19th century romanticism and is not essential to the thought expressed by Humboldt in these passages. What is essential is that the spiritual, artistic or otherwise creative products that we count among the cultural heritage of mankind are generally the achievements of an individual or a selected group of individuals (who, to be sure, may set others to work to accomplish the feat, as in the case of the pyramids). Of course, not only language, but the whole culture of a people, including its religion, folklore and material culture, is the product of the cooperation of its members. However, language is unique among all the spiritual products of men in that all the members of a social community cooperate over generations to create a self-contained system of symbols and operations.[20] It is so complex that no science has succeeded in fully accounting for it. A language may be compared with the Iliad or the Ninth Symphony or the Mona Lisa, except that it is much more complex than any of these and does not stem from an exceptional individual, but from a people. It belongs to the intangible heritage of mankind.

In current programs of documentation and preservation of endangered languages, funding agencies may invest up to half a million euros into a project on the documentation and revitalization of a single language. This is no big sum in comparison to what some people pay for a picture by Van Gogh, not to mention other expenditures.

5.3.2. The value of linguistic diversity

In all of the human and social sciences, one of the fundamental problems is the relation of the universal and the particular. This relation has commonly been conceptualized as

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[18] 'Given the […] relationship of the individual with the mass surrounding him, any significant intellectual activity of the individual does also pertain to that mass, though merely in a mediate and derivative way. The existence of languages, however, proves that there are also spiritual creations which do not at all pass over from one individual to the others, but can only break forth from the simultaneous individual activity of all of them. Thus, since the languages always have a national form, the nations are creative in them in a real and immediate sense.' [trans.- CL]

[19] '[…] cooperation of the individuals manifests itself in the formation of languages in a form not to be found elsewhere.' [trans.- CL]

[20] "Each language is recognized as the cumulative product of the creative capacities of the human mind, built up piece by piece as generations of individual speakers make sense out of their experiences and communicate on a daily basis. Under this view each language lost is irreplaceable." (Mithun 2003)

VARIATION, as expressed by Delacroix (1924: 128f): "Une langue est une variation historique sur le grand thème humain du langage".[21]

Two things are important for this conception:

a. The invariant itself, i.e. human language, does not present itself directly. It appears exclusively under the form of its variants, the historical languages.

b. Variation is essential to the nature of the invariant. Human language could never be fully represented by a single historical language.

The dialectic relationship between the universal and the particular is irreducible. Reduction of the variation to one of the variants does not grant access to the universal, but, quite the contrary, leads to uniformity.

In biology, diversity is a value. The loss of species leads to impoverishment, to a more deprived life for those that remain. Absolute uniformity would mean the end of life. Thus, if life has a value, then biodiversity has a value.

The same is true in the realm of the products of human creativity. The arts, literature and music essentially depend on pluralism. If human thinking and creativity have a value, then variety in thinking and artistic production has a value.

Following the argument of Section 5.3.1, the same applies, finally, to languages. At the level of mankind, it is not only the single language that has a value but more generally the existence of different languages.[22] The coexistence of so many languages on the globe has often been associated with the myth of Babel and has been interpreted as an evil inflicted upon humanity to which a better alternative exists. A close interpretation of the relevant bible passage (Zimmermann 1991) reveals that that is not at all what is said there. Instead, the Old Testament presents linguistic diversity on earth as willed by God in order to avoid human hubris. There is little one could wish to add to this.

6. Conclusion

A language as a historical technique of solving the problems of cognition and communication possesses a value according to different criteria and at different social levels. Section 4 represents an attempt at explicating a number of parameters on which languages differ and which may be used in evaluating them. Again, Section 5 relates possible goals and criteria of evaluation to different levels of evaluators, from the individual via the social community up to mankind, and shows how values are relative to these evaluators. The result of the discussion is that while wholesale evaluation of languages as precious or worthless in comparison with other languages cannot be backed by linguistic science, linguistics can provide a theoretical basis for a rational discussion of the notion "value of a language" and for the differential evaluation of languages in a complex relational network generated by the notion of value as introduced in Section 2.

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[21] 'An individual language is a historical variation on the grand human theme of language.' [trans.- CL]

[22] Cf. Mithun (2004). Applying this principle on the diachronic dimension leads to the conclusion that linguistic change has a value.

The object that a science is dedicated to is naturally a value for that science. It is logical that languages and linguistic diversity constitute a value for a linguist. Linguists engage actively in the documentation of endangered languages and support communities in their efforts to save and revitalize their traditional language. Linguistics is not a value-free science. However, the struggle of the linguist is not selfish professionalism. It is our responsibility towards our social communities and the rest of the world to help maintain human diversity; this is an integral part of the mission of linguistics.

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Author's address	
Seminar für Sprachwissenschaft	
Universität	
D–99105 Erfurt, Germany	Received: 17 December 2005
e-mail: Christian.Lehmann@ Uni-Erfurt.De	Revised: 24 May 2006