



BOOK REVIEW

Museums of Language and the Display of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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The book *Museums of Language and the Display of Intangible Cultural Heritage* not only takes us inside a number of unique and wonderful language museums and exhibitions, it also engages with some key questions associated with displaying and preserving language: how does one make the invisible visible? How does one display the intangible? The book takes us on a journey into making the intangible tangible in various museums of language around the world. The authors reveal myriad approaches to displaying the intangible for contemporary audiences, and they consider how languages can be preserved for future visitors.

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in preserving and exhibiting intangible cultural heritage, following the UNESCO declaration that languages be considered cultural heritage in need of preservation.¹ The exhibition *Dove il sì suona: Gli Italiani e la loro lingua* (Chapter 3) highlighted the value of language as a common cultural inheritance for all

Italians, demonstrating how it is possible to represent, in a physical space, something as immaterial as language. This exhibition reflected a blending of the tangible and intangible through the presence of ancient manuscripts, video documentation and interactive games. It also displayed the variety of language in geographic space, through maps, interactive software, audio and videos, enabling visitors to understand the diversity of sounds and forms of dialects.

Dialects are an intangible heritage and part of daily life in many countries. But in Norway, as the Ivar Aasen Centre (Chapter 10) seeks to illustrate, there is a crucial difference. Whoever you are, wherever you are in Norway, you may speak your own dialect. For some Norwegians this means speaking a dialect, but writing in Nynorsk, one of the standard languages in Norway. And in certain domains, dialects have even replaced the spoken majority language, Norwegian Bokmål. Hence Norway's oldest language museum traces the development from spoken to written language and later to written culture, from intangible to tangible.

In Italy, alongside a unique variety of dialects, French, Occitan, Franco-Provençal, German, Greek, Albanian, Catalan, Serbo-Croat and Slovene are spoken, not to

1 The ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage entered into force in April 2006, providing a policy framework for safeguarding language as living heritage.

mention the languages of new migrants. This may be the reason for the relative density of museums dedicated to individual languages found in Italy. The Museum of Occitan Language and Culture (Chapter 4) is one such museum, which considers the 'recognition of and interest in minority languages to be an essential first step in the appreciation of the intangible cultural heritage of everyone's language, however little-known, and in the safeguarding of threatened languages'. The section dedicated to the Italian part of Occitania displays a rich ethnographic collection of objects related to the traditional activities of the valleys, complementary to the multimedia part of the exhibition. Such representations of tangible and intangible heritage reinforce that language does not exist without the cultural practices within which it is embedded.

Imagine a museum where a love of language, and its inseparable partner culture, can be ignited for children. The Lithuanian Hearth Language Museum (Chapter 3) is one such place. Interactive language toys are provided for all the language topics displayed at the museum. Every object serves the purpose of raising awareness of the history, change, structure, variation, creative and communicational potential, and other attributes of language.

By contrast, some museums deal with language as the object itself. At Mundolingua, or the Museum of Languages, in Paris (Chapter 8), the most important aim is to bring linguistics and language sciences to the general public. Where traditional museums are often seen as boring, sterile places, this museum sought to make the museum experience fun: 'As museums are changing in style and content, so the word is changing in meaning, and we hope we are contributing to that evolution.' If one considers that a museum of language may just be a visual breakdown of categories such as grammar, word formation and orthography, then think again. The Adventurous World of the German Language in Köthen Castle (Chapter 5) exploits the haptic to show the dynamics of word formation. On show is a word-formation engine designed in 1651, which is called the Fünffacher Denckring der Teutschen Sprache ('fivefold think-disc of the German language') because five round discs labelled with letters and syllables can be rotated to build new words. A contemporary digital version of the Denckring is just as appealing to visitors with a touchscreen implemented as a random generator that builds words.

Surprisingly, the UK has no museum devoted to languages or multilingualism, despite the planned English Language Museum for Winchester (Chapter 6). It is in

this context that a pop-up museum of languages for the UK (Chapter 12) evolved. In the 'Multilingual Street: An audio-visual experience', a visual projection of elements of the linguistic landscape (street signs, shopfronts, posters, advertising, graffiti, etc.) are conceptualised, with simultaneous audio of different languages, varieties and accents. The visitor moves through different scenes to a final stage where these languages seem to come together in a socially cohesive manner, displaying multilingual signage, code-switching and pidgin languages, and more.

Finally, the new National Museum of World Writing in Korea (Chapter 15) is not just a museum about scripts; rather it is a museum dealing with cultural history based on an anthropological perspective of writing. The collections and exhibitions seek to communicate the history of diverse cultures and human life and their interconnectedness, as testified in writings, where 'writings are symbols of society, representations of communal identities, tools for communication, and products of human endeavour'.

The afterword (Chapter 17) situates language museums in a state of change, emphasising that language is a cultural, social or political issue as well as a linguistic one. This is evidenced at the Afrikaans Language Museum and Monument (Chapter 2) in South Africa, which has become 'a manifestation/marker of history and identity through acts of representation'. Through the 'poetics of exhibiting', the museum is seemingly able to help construct cultural memory, identity and a social history to meet the needs of diverse visitors from the community.

This book amplifies the complexity of defining and displaying language. It is elegantly organised into three parts, where the chapters traverse broad topics and the photographs provide an added layer of visual engagement. What seems to be missing in the chapters and the exhibits themselves is an exploration of the intangible verbal arts, oral traditions and multimodal forms communication, particularly of Indigenous cultures around the world. Nevertheless, this volume is engaging, offering a rich array of informative, well-written chapters that tantalise the reader. 📖

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