

UNESCO Atlas Language Editor Visits Isle of Man



This year's annual Ned Maddrell Memorial Lecture was given by Editor Chris Moseley, who first came to the attention of many of the Island's Manx speakers with the publication of the third edition of the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, which stated that Manx Gaelic was extinct. This statement provoked a strong defence from the Island's growing number of speakers who challenged this conclusion and successfully prompted a revision of UNESCO's criteria.

Chris Moseley gave his audience an insight into how the Atlas works and just how vulnerable languages (they don't analyse dialects) can be in a world reared by a select number of dominant tongues. Now produced in both digital and printed format, thanks to the financial generosity of Norway, their work has expanded rapidly. It's clear that an alarming number of languages are in terminal decline, dying at the rate of one every few weeks, the reasons behind their demise broadly predictable.

There's something a little incongruous about plotting language demise on a map, but it serves to remind us how vulnerable any language can be in the face of uniformity.

The map is now based on Google technology so with a tap of the index finger it's possible to study the current status of thousands of languages, assess the number of speakers, look at future policies and be cognisant of potential threats. Using a colour differential, rather than polygons, makes it easier to recognise problem areas in the language arena with public feedback always welcome.

There has been a steady stream of thoughts, ideas and suggestions since publication of the third edition, including some indignation from speakers in both the Isle of Man and Cornwall. But a healthy dialogue between editors and Manx representatives has now secured the creation of two new categories under the headings 'revived' and 'revitalised'.

Manx Language Officer Adrian Cain, commented, "Chris Moseley also took the opportunity to visit the Bunscoill (Manx Language Primary School) following the lecture, recognising this as a fantastic achievement and an example of what can be done to maintain endangered languages. In this sense the revival in the fortunes of Manx is a success story for the Island and one which UNESCO is now taking a keen interest in".

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