An introductory note

Meeting a few years ago in Phoenix, a conference of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (part of the Modern Language Association) had as its theme the future of language teaching and learning. The participants were all department heads or administrators and, instead of papers on substantive scholarly topics, almost all the presentations were practical pieces, ‘how-to’ sessions and the like. Two main threads ran through the meetings. First of all, there was much lamentation over the sorry state of the language-teaching discipline, apparently trapped in a circle where declining enrolments mean fewer resources, where weakened resources mean decreased academic clout and respect. Second, it was easy to see the relative superiority of those involved in teaching Spanish language and culture. The Hispanicists were clearly the nuclear physicists of the discipline: they knew it and so did all their lesser brethren.

This chapter has grown out of remarks I made at that Phoenix conference, and, while their central context is thus American, the issues are of wider concern. At more or less the same time in Britain, for instance, the Minister of Education was announcing an ‘awards programme’ meant to encourage language teaching and learning, designed to heighten the motivation of language learners. It is of course interesting to consider why such programmes suggest themselves at all, and why they arise when they do. Further, the Minister’s politically correct remarks on language learning in a diverse world imply something of the power behind an opposite thrust – the recognition of diversity as simply more fuel for the English juggernaut:

The Government wholeheartedly supports the Europe-wide drive to stimulate language learning. It is increasingly important in a world
of international trade, commerce, advanced communication and tourism, where people and nations are interdependent. (Blackstone, 2000: 429)

The tensions that exist in a world increasingly dominated by English, but also a world of continuing linguistic and cultural diversity – these are the important matters which, perhaps unwittingly, the Minister touched upon in her rather formulaic remarks.

**English in the world**

These are difficult times for some languages – the small ones, the stateless ones, those of ‘lesser-used’ or minority status, and so on. A recent conference exchange is illustrative here:

‘What do you think of Gaelic now – be honest!’
‘Well, it’s a language that may still do you some good in the Highlands and Islands, maybe still in parts of Cape Breton, but outside those little areas, it isn’t going to take you very far…’
‘Isn’t it used in any other settings, then?’
‘No, it’s simple, really – no one to speak it with. Who did you have in mind?’
‘Maybe Scots abroad…?’
‘Listen, outside Scotland, Gaelic speakers hardly use the language at all, even amongst themselves.’
‘OK, but what d’you think of the language itself – is it a good sort of language, or what?’
‘Actually, I’m not too keen on it, as a language *per se*. It has become pretty bastardised, you know, bit of a mixture really – different dialects, English borrowings…’

This conversation surely has a familiar ring to it: a ‘small’ language struggling against larger forces, a variety increasingly confined geographically and socially, a medium whose intrinsic status (however illogically, from a linguist’s point of view) is often felt to be degraded and impure. And, if it proves difficult to maintain such a language in something like its native state, what attraction does it possess for language learners elsewhere? Why would anyone study it at school or university? There is an elementary catch-22 here: how can you induce the learning of a language when its community of use is negligible, but how will the latter ever grow unless more join it? Who will, in due course,