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LANGUAGE AND THE UNITED NATIONS: A Preliminary Review

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Introduction

As a worldwide organization bringing together virtually all the sovereign states of the world, the United Nations is, at its core, an organization that values communication for the purpose of collective action. The sovereign states of the world use many languages to conduct their business and operate their governments; these languages represent only a fraction of the languages in the world, since many peoples without sovereign standing have their own languages, sometimes with some official status within the states where these languages are spoken, and sometimes not. Given the difficulties involved in defining what constitutes a language (Is Flemish a language or a variety of Dutch? Is Jamaican patois a language or a variety of English?), we do not know how many languages exist in the world; but the number certainly runs into the thousands (six thousand is a frequently cited figure).

The languages of government of the sovereign states often have little international standing: they are used within their boundaries but seldom spoken beyond. Only a handful of languages can be regarded as languages of international dissemination. These are languages that have gained this status over extended periods of time, often through historical accident, seldom or never because of any kind of inherent linguistic suitability for international diffusion. Languages spread not because of the quality of their verbs but because of the power of the armies or the financiers who use them. It is said that money talks, and that actions speak louder than words, and both are true.

There are also languages that are not official languages of sovereign states but have considerable diffusion because they are the languages of diasporic communities. Yiddish was once such a language; languages like Cantonese and Gujarati belong in such a category. The issue of immigrant languages and the schools has become a major public policy issue in many industrialized countries.[1] Arguably, the fabric of official languages and language

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[1] See Gorter 2001, and Florian Coulmas at http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/commentary/data/000162

policies in the various states, and of formally recognized languages in international organizations and businesses, is little more than a framework superimposed on the much more complex pattern of actual language use across the world. Scholars have called this complex pattern of languages the world language system.[2]

There are very few states of any size in which only one language is used. Most states have their language minorities; in some states dozens or even hundreds of different languages are spoken. Within these states, relatively few people speak or use only one language: they need more than one language to conduct their business or lead their lives. Such multilingualism is not a monopoly of developing countries: the majority of the world's population is bilingual in the sense that it regularly uses, or is capable of using, a second or third language, at varying levels of fluency and for a variety of purposes. Only speakers of English are apt to suppose that their language and their language alone is enough to allow them commerce with the whole world.

We can perhaps go a step further and observe that many people, in many parts of the world, are quite uncertain about what their first language, or so-called mother tongue, actually is. Children who grow up in bilingual households, or in no household at all, may learn speech through more than one language simultaneously. Arguably, it is literate elites that label languages and separate them out, creating terms like "mother tongue" and "native language" or, for that matter, essentially abstract concepts like "Urdu" or "English" or "Chinese" and codify them into separate and distinct realities, assigning them particular value. We value languages as conveyors and storehouses of culture, especially when those languages have writing systems that allow them to preserve texts over generations; but languages are first and foremost means of mundane communication: most of their other less tangible characteristics are the products of ideology.

Official and working languages of the United Nations

When the United Nations was founded in 1945, and indeed even before it was founded, a common language of international dialogue was needed for its operations. The League of Nations, as is well known, used two languages, French and English, to conduct its business. These languages were chosen because they were widely used in international diplomacy, business and science, and widely taught in educational systems across the world. Their emergence into this role extended back over several centuries and need not concern us now. Suffice it to say that the negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919

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[2] See Abram de Swaan 2001.

were conducted in English and French rather than French alone largely because two of the leaders, Lloyd George of Britain and Woodrow Wilson of the United States either did not know French at a reasonable level of competence or chose not to speak it. English was not wholly unknown as a language of diplomacy even before 1919, in part because of the wide expanse of the British Empire and the dependent states at its edges, resulting on occasion in the redaction of international treaties and related documents in English.

When, following Versailles, the League of Nations was established, and despite the fact that the United States ultimately chose not to join, French and English were chosen as its two working languages.[3] They were used in tandem: documents were translated from one language to the other; consecutive interpretation slowed meetings to a snail's pace. By debating slowly, diplomats had more time to think about what they were saying; and the use of two languages occasionally promoted the resolution of disputes through ambiguity, though it created other disputes for the same reason. While there were occasional suggestions that a single language should be used, in this pre-technological environment the diplomats, at least, managed with two languages, while the bureaucrats for the most part spoke French at the organization's headquarters in Geneva.

Not surprisingly, given the language regime of the League of Nations, the languages chosen by the United Nations to conduct its business were French and English, and these remain the languages of the Secretariat to this day.[4] As the successor to the League, the United Nations took under its wing a number of other specialized international organizations that had their own separate histories and on occasion their own language regimes (the Universal Postal Union, for example, used only French), but for the most part French and English dominated.[5]

But if language customs, carried over from the League, prevailed, changes in language technology opened up new possibilities. The early years of the United Nations were characterized by considerable tension, even symbolic pitched battles, between the practitioners of consecutive interpretation and the emergence of a new breed of interpreters practicing simultaneous interpretation, enabled by the new electronic technology of headphones and interpreters' booths. This system, developed in the 1930s by IBM, under the inspiration of the American businessman Edward A. Filene (of Filene's

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[3] On language at the League of Nations, see Lapenna 1969.

[4] On language at the UN, see Fettes 1996, Lapenna 1970-71, Léger 1996, Müller 1996, Pearl 1996, Tonkin 1996, Weiser 1996.

[5] The rules of procedure adopted by the UN General Assembly in its first session in 1946 applied to "all the organs of the United Nations, other than the International Court of Justice," but new rules adopted in 1947 were limited to the General Assembly.

department stores), and used extensively in the Nuremberg Trials,[6] gradually gained traction at the UN. While the day-to-day business of the secretariat took place primarily in a bilingual setting without the need for interpreting services, it became possible to contemplate the wider use of additional languages in formal settings, such as the General Assembly. From the first it was decided that, while French and English would serve as working languages, five languages would be regarded as "official," namely French and English, plus Chinese, Russian, and Spanish. We should remember that the term "United Nations" was a term coined by Roosevelt to describe the Allies in World War II, even before it became the name of the United Nations Organization. It is accordingly no surprise that German, a highly influential language in Europe, and Japanese were not chosen as UN languages. The official languages were accorded limited status in the affairs of the UN, notably as languages of translation: many documents were translated into all five languages by a growing translation staff.

In 1948, the General Assembly granted working-language status to Spanish, the language of the largest number of member states (more than English and more than French). This change did not affect the languages of the Secretariat, which continued to be French and English. Twenty years later, Russian followed (in 1968) and then Chinese in 1973. In 1973 Arabic was newly granted limited official and working status, raised to full status in 1980, thereby essentially eliminating the distinction between working language and official language in the context of the General Assembly.

This language regime has endured, through what is now almost forty years. As with the composition of the Security Council, also a reflection of the will of the victors of World War II, bringing about change is extremely difficult. On occasion the addition of other languages has been formally proposed, among them Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Portuguese, and Bahasa Indonesia. When a United Nations office was established in Vienna, the German-speaking member-states undertook to bear the cost of limited German translation services. Questions have been raised about the introduction of such languages as Japanese and Turkish. Esperanto has also been proposed, but never in an official context.[7]

Bringing about change in the language regime at the United Nations is above all a political issue. No member-state whose language is among the working languages of the UN is likely to give up that status without a fight, so addition rather than substitution or reduction of languages is about the only possibility. But such additions would add to the cost of

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[6] For an account of the history of simultaneous interpretation, see Francesca Gaiba, *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998).

[7] The so-called Harry Plan. See Harry & Mandel 1979.

language services and could have the effect of slowing business down. Furthermore, to admit one additional language would be to open the floodgates to others, and virtually any set of rational criteria based on equality of communication would jeopardize the defensibility of certain of the present working languages, particularly Russian and Chinese.

Away from New York, the situation is a little more flexible. For example, the UNESCO General Conference recognizes the six UN languages as its working languages, but has also recently added Hindi, Italian and Portuguese as official languages.[8] Official language status has, however, only limited benefits.[9] The Universal Postal Union maintains French as its official language, but in 1994 English was added as a working language, thereby making the administration of the UPU essentially bilingual. As a matter of policy, the UPU's publications are generally produced in the six languages of the United Nations, plus Portuguese.[10]

In the Food and Agriculture Organization, five languages have official status: English, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese. Language use in most FAO meetings is decided on an ad hoc basis, depending on the languages of the participants and the region of the world in which the meeting is taking place. According to an FAO report on language use issued some ten years ago,[11] "English is the predominant language used in meetings held at Headquarters as well as in Asia and the Pacific and Europe. In Africa, French and English are nearly equally used. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the main languages are Spanish and English. In the Near East and North Africa, they are Arabic and English. When meetings are held in a single language, it tends to be English; this was the case in 94 of the 100 monolingual meetings held in 1998-99. English is generally included when other languages are used; only one multilingual meeting was held in 1998-99 that did not include English."

Clearly, a large percentage of FAO meetings takes place in a single language. The report goes on: "While five-language meetings represented only 9 percent of the meetings, interpretation provided for them constituted 52 percent of the interpretation workload, measured in interpreter days. Four-language meetings represented 8 percent of meetings and 18 percent of interpreter workload." In effect, the FAO is using a two-tier system,

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[8] See the Rule 54 of the Rules of Procedure of the General Conference: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001874/187429e.pdf.
[9] Rule 55:2: "At the request of any delegation, any other important document, including verbatim records, may be translated into any other official language. The delegation concerned shall provide the necessary translators if the occasion arises.
[10] http://www.upu.int/en/the-upu/languages.html
[11] http://www.fao.org/docrep/X7374e/x7374e04.htm

in which a limited number of meetings observes the spirit and intent of its espousal of multilingualism,[12] while other meetings adopt less expensive and more restrictive practices.

To return to the United Nations itself, we can assert that the immediate and proximate cause of the decision of the United Nations to use certain languages and not others was determined by a particular set of circumstances current in the 1940s: the countries with the most influence, and with languages spoken by large numbers of people, were the countries whose languages were chosen for use. While the argument could be made that French and English had wide distribution internationally, and that the number of speakers of these languages as second languages far exceeded the second-language-speaking populations of other languages; and while similar arguments could be made for the other languages that were chosen (namely that they were widely used at least at the regional level), the fact remains that it was international influence that determined the languages chosen. Having one's language used in the General Assembly and elsewhere in the United Nations has certain obvious advantages: the availability of documents and the presence of interpreting services spring immediately to mind. If a member-state's delegates can express themselves in their own languages, their power of persuasion goes up, and the choice of whom to send to represent the member state in question becomes a lot easier. But more important than any of these considerations is the prestige associated with such designation and, at least in some cases, the fact that others are obliged to adapt. As lingua francas, some of the UN languages are more important than others: Spanish, French and English are the languages of many of the member-states; so is Arabic. Russian has declined in importance as the satellites of the former Soviet Union have moved away from Moscow. Chinese may be spoken by a large number of people in China, but its international circulation, at least among elites, is limited.

Supporting the UN's language policies

Maintaining the language services is expensive. While the translation and interpretation services of the UN pale in comparison to those of the European Union and its various institutions, they are still a very important part of the secretariat and its budget. Nor are they inexpensive to run. Recent years have seen a greater use of contract services: the UN tends to hire interpreters and translators for short periods at times of high activity. There

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[12] The report states at the outset: "Linguistic and cultural diversity are essential features of international cooperation. The ability of FAO members and partners to express themselves and receive documents and publications in the Organization's official languages enhances their participation in FAO activities and the value they gain from it."

has also been a marked growth in the use of technological aids, such as on-line dictionaries and thesauri. While these moves have saved money and in some instances improved quality, the fact remains that the translation and interpretation services are of far greater benefit to the states whose languages are among those used by the UN than they are to the others. Yet a part of the dues of all member states goes to support the language services, even if their own languages are not among those favored with attention.

The language policies of the United Nations can be described as a compromise between monolingualism – the adoption of a single language in which to conduct the UN's business – and total multilingualism, a situation in which there would be precious little understanding at all. But these policies do not extend into every corner of the organization: much of the business of the General Assembly is carried on informally, without the presence of interpreters and without official documents. Any student of language policy will tell you that to have no language policy at all is itself a form of language policy – in which the most powerful tend to dominate the exchange and all other parties submit to the most powerful. In New York, at least, two factors push these exchanges in the direction of English: the fact that English is the local language and the fact that members of the secretariat tend to have a high level of English competence and diplomats posted to New York are chosen at least in part because they have a command of English. This informal dominance of English extends not only to totally informal settings, over which the formal procedures of the United Nations have no control, but also to numbers of meetings in which English is used because of the absence of language services: the UN budget is under such strain and available language service personnel are stretched so thin that many meetings must dispense with interpreters. Thus, away from the major activities of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the rest, informal language use follows different patterns from those applied centrally.[13]   From time to time, protests are lodged with the Secretary-General about this inequality of language use, but the Secretary-General is apt to reply that, while he wishes to uphold language equality, he is constrained by the limitations of budget and personnel.[14] In 1999, at the request of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General established the position of Coordinator for Multilingualism,[15] whose task is to encourage the application of the multilingual policies of the UN. However, eager to conduct business rapidly and efficiently, officials and diplomats often sidestep these policies.

In fact, balancing the need for equality and the need for speed and efficiency is particularly complex and is seldom based on any principles more lofty than simple financial grounds,

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[13] On informal language use at the United Nations, see Tonkin & Edwards 1984, Pearl 1996
[14] See for example the response to the letter from Spanish-speaking countries addressed to Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2001: http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/56/a56176.pdf
[15] http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/236/34/PDF/N0023634.pdf?OpenElement

modified perhaps by political pressure from those concerned about equality. Specialists in language planning well know that maintenance of the balance is hard indeed, but without it one either has no language policy at all (in which event one language, currently English, drives out all others) or one has a policy so complex and under-funded that it cannot succeed. We can cite two classic cases. One is the European Union, where the sheer number of "equal" languages causes even the defenders of equality and multilingualism to throw up their hands in despair and take to using English or another language of wide diffusion to conduct their business, regardless of official policy. A second is the Republic of South Africa, where, at the time of the overthrow of apartheid, a strong desire was expressed to officialize African languages along with the hitherto reasonably equal English and Afrikaans languages. Nine African languages were added, to make eleven official languages proclaimed equal under the constitution. But the government was wholly unprepared for the expenditures necessary to develop these languages and expand their use in government and business. As a result, the most significant difference between the time of apartheid (when, paradoxically, the government supported African languages in order to keep Africans in the infamous Bantustans) and today is that English alone is emerging as the language of government and business, to the detriment not only of African languages but of Afrikaans as well (in spite of the fact that there are more non-white speakers of Afrikaans than there are white speakers).[16]

Among the various mechanisms supportive of UN language policies is an extensive program of language training available to UN staff, members of UN missions, and occasionally others. The United Nations Language and Communications Program (UNLCP) offers training in the UN's six languages for secretariat staff and diplomats in New York, and UNITAR also offers language courses. The United Nations Language Proficiency Examination certifies competence in UN languages, supporting personnel policies that provide additional compensation for language competence.

Linguistic outreach

But the United Nations is hardly an island: its offices and regional centers around the world are situated not only in countries where one or more of the six UN languages are spoken, but also in countries where other languages are used. Formal policies do not extend to these situations, but local personnel policies and sometimes translation and interpretation support take them into account. Furthermore, given that the United Nations is dependent on the goodwill of its member states, reaching out to local communities all across the world

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[16] See Myers-Scotton 1990, Phillipson 2003, Tonkin 2007, Cuvelier and others 2007.

is important. Also important is the provision of support for teaching about the United Nations in schools. Some materials about the United Nations are developed centrally by the Department of Public Information and disseminated in the six UN languages. The worldwide network of regional information offices and United Nations Associations adapts these materials for local use, translating them into many local languages.[17] While these activities take place largely outside the regular UN budget, they are a part of the linguistic network that supports UN activities. While formally the organization works in six languages, in practice its message is conveyed through dozens, perhaps hundreds, of languages.

Programs on language and languages

Language is also a significant element in the programs and activities of the United Nations and its specialized agencies. UNESCO takes a particular interest in the topic. UNESCO's Endangered Languages Program is one of a number of efforts worldwide to document languages at risk of extinction and to provide small language communities with support that will help them reverse their declining fortunes and cultivate their languages.[18] Its website[19] points out that "It is estimated that, if nothing is done, half of 6000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century. With the disappearance of unwritten and undocumented languages, humanity would lose not only a cultural wealth but also important ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages." Traditionally, UNESCO has also advocated for the virtues of mother-tongue education, now part of its contribution to Education For All, a coalition of organizations including UNESCO and the World Bank. UNESCO links mother-tongue education with its program in Multilingual Education, designed, among other things, to generate learning and teaching materials in local languages.

At the United Nations, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues,[20] an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council established in the year 2000, includes active programmatic attention to the situation of indigenous languages. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) refers specifically to the right of indigenous

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[17] The United Nations Information Service in Vienna, for example, "produces a wide range of information products on the work of the United Nations and current international issues, including German, Hungarian, Slovak and Slovene language versions of press releases, backgrounders and Secretary-General's statements." http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/unvienna/unis.html

[18] On language revitalization see, for example, Fishman 1991, 2001.

[19] http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/cultural-diversity/languages-and-multilingualism/endangered-languages/

[20] http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/

peoples to preserve their languages and to educate their children in these languages.

The Indigenous Peoples Declaration, because it enshrines certain linguistic rights, is a matter of interest to the Human Rights Council, whose mandate extends to rights to language. The work of the Council is different in nature from some of the other activities already mentioned in that it addresses language tangentially, as part of a broader set of concerns. Since the rather limited attention to language in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), numerous United Nations instruments have broadened the relationship between language and rights, for example the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959) or the Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992).[21]

Thus we can say that the United Nations takes an interest in languages directly, through numerous specific programs that address languages and their teaching and preservation (I have mentioned only a small sample), and indirectly, to the extent that language intersects with, or is an element in, the exercise of human rights.

Language and development

Our discussion so far has focused on the United Nations, the specialized agencies, and the programs that they operate. But what happens when these programs intersect with the wider public, in other words when the ordered linguistic world of the United Nations encounters the multilingual realities beyond the East River or the Palais des Nations? We have already observed that the United Nations must use many languages to communicate its message to the world, often working through ancillary organizations like the United Nations Associations in various countries. But it is also evident that in the execution of its programs linguistic issues arise in numerous ways. One cannot hope to carry out a development project without the means to communicate with the population for whose benefit it has been conceived. One cannot hope to carry out a successful peacekeeping operation without the ability to communicate with the peoples affected (currently the UN has troops in the field in fifteen separate peacekeeping efforts around the world)[22]. Nor, indeed, can one hope to create an open society in which equality of communication ensures a voice for all, unless one creates policies that allow for full participation in as

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[21] On language rights, see Skuttnab-Kangas & Phillipson 1995, Kontra and others 1999, May 2001, Kymlicka & Patten 2003

[22] http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/factsheet.shtml. A 2007 report by the Secretary-General (Peacekeeping Best Practices A/62/593) alludes (p. 9) to a request for a Peacekeeping Best Practices Section on translation – an indication both of the topic's importance and perhaps of its relative neglect.

many languages as possible.

For many years it was assumed that language diversity was a hindrance to economic development, or at least that it was an element largely irrelevant: economists and political scientists have been notorious for their lack of attention to language as a factor in development. Increasingly experts are becoming aware of the need not for linguistic unity but for multilingual policies that maximize the social participation of all groups, yet in a context in which translingual communication is made as easy and as smooth as possible.[23] Traditional patterns of economic development tend to jeopardize local languages by moving young people away from their communities and bringing outside experts in. The UN's recent emphasis on sustainable development and on social participation has changed that picture. As the UN Human Development Report for 2004 pointed out, "By choosing one or a few languages over others, a state often signals the dominance of those for whom the official language is their mother tongue. This choice can limit the freedom of many non-dominant groups – feeding intergroup tensions…. It becomes a way of excluding people from politics, education, access to justice and many other aspects of civic life. It can entrench socio-economic inequalities between groups" (Fukuda-Parr 2004:60). Thus language is at the very root of efforts to create democracy and democratic institutions, and the use of language for purposes of inclusion is vitally important.

It follows that the UN has not only to be sensitive to language issues in its projects on the ground, but also that it has to make an effort to involve and use local languages. The extent to which it is successful in this endeavor is unclear. Reports on UN projects seldom single out language management as a variable, nor do such matters as translation and interpretation turn up in summary budgets. It is an item that cries out for more extensive study.

Future directions

In this paper we have looked at language and the United Nations from three broad perspectives: first, formal language policy at the UN; second, UN programs concerned directly or indirectly with languages (everything from educational programs at UNESCO and the World Bank to language rights at the Human Rights Council): and, third, language management in UN projects and activities in the field. The purpose behind the paper is to

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[23] See, for example, Jean-Louis Arcand and François Grin, "Language in Economic Development: Is English Special and is Linguistic Fragmentation Bad?" at http://graduateinstitute.ch/webdav/site/international_economics/ shared/international_economics/websites/arcand/publications/LIED-7(3)-1.pdf. See also Nettle 2000, Lamberton 2002.

stimulate debate and study, perhaps with a view to making or modifying policy. There is a lot that we do not know. A research agenda for language and the UN might include some of the following questions:[24]

- What is the relation between formal and informal language use at the United Nations in New York and elsewhere, and how has it changed over time?
- What is the quality of language use by non-native speakers of the organization's working languages?
- How do the international language policies of the United Nations fit with other policies on language use at the international level?
- How does the United Nations use additional languages in getting its message to the public, and who pays?
- What is the nature of language practice in peacekeeping missions, and is it optimal?
- To what extent are the development efforts of the United Nations sensitive to the need to involve and give a voice to local populations?

We cannot end this paper without some allusion to the Millennium Development Goals, since they are so central to much of the UN's work today. At first glance, the eight goals might appear to have little to do with language as such, yet in reality each one of them is dependent upon the power of communication in a multilingual environment. If we are to end poverty and hunger (the first goal) or achieve gender equality (the third) or improve child health or maternal health (the fourth and fifth), or combat AIDS (the sixth) or promote environmental sustainability (the seventh), we have got to reach people where they are, including where they are linguistically – not just so that they receive the message that we seek to deliver but also so that they can respond to that message by raising their own voices and joining in the common effort. Universal education (the second goal) depends in a direct sense on access to local languages and their development as media of instruction. Underlying all these efforts is the creation of a global partnership for development (the eighth goal). Such a partnership, if it is to be anything other than a neocolonial effort to modernize at all cost, needs language equality and active linguistic communication to sustain it. If language is not mentioned specifically in the MDG's it is not because of its irrelevance but because of its underlying and essential role in them all.

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[24] See Tonkin 2003.

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