

## **Empire, lingua franca, vernacular – the roots of endangerment**

Empires everywhere – spiritual and academic, as well as temporal – have glamorized the diversity under their control, and seen it as a measure of their own greatness. But they also tend to level the differences, to educate, integrate and co-ordinate, if not to destroy individual character. Even the concept of “peace” is problematic for an empire: does it mean *diganta rājya* (control to the distant horizon) ~ the Roman Empire’s claim *pax orbis terrarum*? or *śānti* (serenity) ~ the Roman Church’s *pacem in terris*? This has implications for how much diversity can be tolerated.

These ideas about power and diversity can be applied to the microcosm of languages. The diversity of languages is reflexion of diversity achieved by the human species in different locations. The challenge for free states is to embrace the diversity – not easy, but the alternative is empire. One approach to this is expressed in the mission of FEL:

to support, enable and assist the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages.

This is not to deny the importance, in history, of large-scale lingua-francas: e.g. here in Anatolia, Turkish, and in earlier ages Persian, Greek, Aramaic and Lydian. But a lingua-franca is a human technology, chosen originally to enable effective communication within an empire. Indigenous languages, by contrast, enhance direct knowledge of particular territories, and more intimate traditions: their study – their documentation, protection and promotion – provides a guard against blindness, a way to keep a sense of one’s own land.