Phonethica

Project Phoenthica explores the world through the phonetics of world languages using technology of media art.

At present, there exist in our world at least 5000 language, some says as 6000. But fifty to ninety percent of these languages are predicted to disappear within the next century.

Our language is thus in a state of crisis. Therefore, some international organizations and institutions have been engaged in projects for endangered language which aim to protect languages that are vanishing at a rate of one every two weeks and to archive them in libraries.

However, Project Phoenthica does not aim to protect languages in this way, Rather, it endeavors to invent a dynamic method by which we can understand and appreciate our diversity and randomly disseminate it as part of a wider social movement.

Project Phonethica is involving the research and development of computer system called "Phonethica," a kind of dictionary, as well as a kind of world encyclopedia.

For example, Japanese and French are vastly different languages, but the French expression "Ça va?" meaning, "How are you?" and the Japanese word for mackerel, "saba," actually sound quite similar.

In fact, because the structure of human vocal organs varies little from Japanese to French to Kenyan, these types of coincidentally shared sounds occur often. Anyone who speaks more than two languages is probably aware of a few examples of this. And sometimes one finds humor in the extreme disparity in meaning held by words which sound similar.

Phonethica locates these types of words by comparing the approximate value of the IPA – International Phonetic Alphabet.

For instance, a word inputted by a user will be translated into IPA which will then be compared with the vocabularies in the world language database. Phonethica will extract those words which have approximately the same IPA as the user's selection, and the result will be displayed, representing its approximate value in three dimensional graphics.

The user can dynamically access various information related to those languages including descriptions explaining the culture and race of the people who speak the languages, the environments in which they live, the types of food they eat, the kinds of songs they sing, their history, religion, economic and political situations. Information on grammar, vocabulary, orthography, phonology, writing and numbering systems are also available.

In this way, facts unknown to us come within our reach, not based on the matching of definitions for different words that we can usually locate in a dictionary, but through words that are phonetically similar by chance.

For instance, you may be inspired to learn about the lives of the Taba-speaking inhabitants of the Molucca region of Indonesia, which you never even knew existed. And the next day, you may want to tell your friends about your discoveries. And if you find the salutations and customs of that region particularly interesting, you and your circle of friends might want to adopt them into your own interactions and create a trend. Eventually someone in the group might be roused to visit that place. And, perhaps even years or decades later, that person may decide to take the plunge and travel there. If we live in a world where one can be provoked by such coincidence, then we can imagine the potential that may still lie therein.

If, in this way, two symbols which previously appeared as unrelated can become connected through their very sound, then this common denominator can create a valuable new interface which potentially could relate all aspects of the Earth to each other.

This interface will at first promote an awareness of our diversity which will then, paradoxically, give rise to a quiet consciousness of our being related respectively to one another. The world will secretly but certainly grow conscious of its connectedness and its universality.

Project Phoenthica is the quest for practical strategy of survival in this often lethargic world through an organic synergy which combines scientific technology with the magic of art, while taking hints from our diversity.

Takumi Endo, director
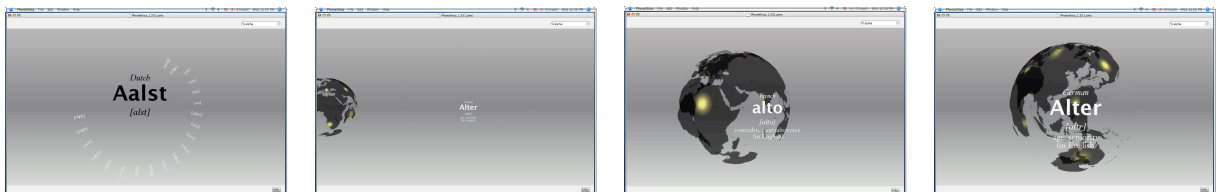
Call for Collaborators!

Collaborators are sought in the form of artists (involved in digital arts, new media and new technology); scientists and scholars (engaged in the field of linguistics, phonetics, anthropology, sociology, literature, philosophy, science, technology and so on). Feel free to contact with director : tkm@inexhale.net