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## Millennium Commission bid for World Language Centre

– British Council press release, Dec 96

Without language there would be no history, no religion, no science, no expression of ideas, no society – yet there is no centre in the world that celebrates the phenomenon of language. This extraordinary void in our cultural heritage is about to be filled. The British Council is seeking Millennium Commission funding of £8 million to support a £20 million project for a hi-tech **World of Language** multi-media exhibition and visitor centre. It will be situated within reach of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London.

The centre will use sound and vision, interactive displays, the latest digital information systems and computer-generated imagery and animation to tell the story of language. Visitors will be able to point to a spot on the globe and hear the language or dialect of the region; write their own graffiti on an electronic wall; pick up the phone and talk to Chaucer, Shakespeare, a Pilgrim Father; discover how children learn to speak; hear a male voice choir, a famous speech or their favourite poem read by a well-known actress; enter a virtual reality environment and read the signs on the New York Subway.

**The World of Language** will confirm Britain as a global centre for the celebration and study of language and the English language in particular. It is especially fitting that the centre will be near the site where its greatest exponent, William Shakespeare, plied his trade. "Britain is the first home of the world's first language," says Roger Bowers of the British Council. "We want to celebrate that. And we want visitors to **The World of Language** to explore their own questions – where words come from, how machines translate, why advertisements work, when the first alphabet was invented, what will happen to languages in the 21st century. We want to bring together our creativity in the arts

and sciences, in media and the new technologies, to put Britain at the forefront of the communications revolution".

**The World of Language** will be an international centre for academic research as well as a major tourist attraction. It will provide a single point of access for the wide range of databases in the UK for the analysis and description of English – text corpora, concordances, grammars, dialect surveys. The centre will be electronically linked to schools and colleges around the country and overseas to provide online access to audio, visual and text support for the national curriculum. It will also develop new products for teaching and learning English and for teacher training.

Sir David Puttnam, one of the project's supporters sees opportunities to bring the media into the classroom. "I want to see an animated curriculum", he says, "where children can have access to the best and the liveliest resources that the media and information technology can provide". Universities, computer companies, commerce and industry are all being approached to put money and ideas into the project.

The centre will bring the world of language to the world – in the heart of London. It will open on Bankside by the year 2000 and aims to attract 250,000 visitors a year. It will not require recurrent government funding but will pay its way from admission charges, publishing, commissions and other activities.

Apart from the connection with Shakespeare, the London Borough of Southwark is a particularly suitable site for **The World of Language** as 30 languages are taught in the Borough's schools and over 100 spoken in the community.

"Bids for millennium funding closed in November," says Roger Bowers. "We shan't know until some time next year whether our bid has been successful. But we are approaching a number of major sponsors – and government has already expressed strong interest."

*Note* The British Council is Britain's principal agency for cultural relations with other countries. □