

Newsletter for September 2016

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President Fettes: A language “expressing our common humanity” in a world torn by “war, persecution, and deprivation of basic human needs”

July 24, 2016. “Vast numbers of people throughout the world are suffering from war, persecution, and deprivation of basic human needs,” warned the president of the Universal Esperanto Association, Dr Mark Fettes, addressing the 101st World Congress of Esperanto in Slovakia in July. Speakers of Esperanto, “a neutral language ... expressing our common humanity” that “bridges the barriers between us,” are uniquely placed to affect this world for the better. Referencing the founder of Esperanto, L.L.Zamenhof, who in 1913 stated, “I am a human being, and the whole of humanity I regard as one family,” Fettes drew the attention of the gathering of well over 1000 people to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose language echoed Zamenhof’s world view. He noted that the two International Covenants further defining the Declaration – those on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – “turn 50 this December.”

The theme of the Congress was “Social Justice – Linguistic Justice.” “All of us understand that ... people experience marginalization and exclusion in today’s society,” Fettes explained. They often disregard how language plays a critical role in this process. “Language is such a fundamental part of the social structure that it is often invisible, as water might be to a fish. We frequently fail to notice when other people experience marginalization or exclusion on the basis of language, just as we fail to perceive how language is a part of such essential social functions as health care or education.”

UEA mourns death of leading advocate for Esperanto, Nobel Laureate

August 23, 2016. Reinhard Selten, a leading advocate for Esperanto who received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1994 for his work on game theory, has died at the age of 86. The son of an Esperanto speaker, he taught himself Esperanto as a 17-year-old, met his wife through Esperanto and taught the language to his younger brother. He was a life member of the Universal Esperanto Association and also an Honorary Patron of the association. With Jonathan Pool he wrote an introduction to game theory (1995, in Esperanto) and with Helmar Frank a study of bilingualism in Europe (2005, in German). Selten taught, successively, at the Free University of Berlin, the University of Bielefeld, and the University of Bonn. He also served as visiting professor at the University of California Berkeley.

Congress participants: “The fight for linguistic justice is an aspect of a larger, broader struggle for social justice and human rights for all”

September 15, 2016. A series of lively plenary sessions on the theme of “social justice – linguistic justice” brought together Esperanto speakers from around the world during the World Congress of Esperanto in Nitra this July, according to the final report on the sessions, recently completed by former UEA board member José Antonio Vergara (Chile). Vergara was joined by Manuela Ronco (Italy), Paulína Kožuchová (Slovakia) and A. Giridhar Rao (India) in leading the discussions, which were supplemented by two seminars, one on the fight against sexism and racism, led by Adjé Adjévi (Togo) and Elisabeth Schwarzer (Germany), and the other, on literary expression, by István Ertl (Hungary/Luxemburg)

“The forms of social oppression can victimize individuals and groups on the basis of their various identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, handicap, etc.), which are often interlinked or come together in particular individuals,” the report states. These forms of social oppression include the suppression of languages and their speakers, and the denial of the linguistic rights of children, particularly their right to learn in their own languages. While the linguistic aspect of the denial of human rights is all too frequently underestimated or ignored, it is one aspect of a much larger struggle for human rights and affirmative non-discrimination in general.

The report concludes with the following observation: “The participants expressed their commitment to engaging themselves in the fight to make their respective societies, and their common patrimony of Esperanto, more just – ‘because we see in each person just a human being (with his or her freely defined identity), a subject of essential dignity and rights.’”

These conclusions will help define the Universal Esperanto Association’s activities at the United Nations and its coöperation with other NGOs committed to human rights and social justice.

UEA intervenes in Geneva on indigenous rights

16 July 2016. Participating in the 9th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP, 11-15 July 2016), Stefano Keller, chief UEA representative at UN Geneva, intervened on agenda item 7: The aims of sustainable development and the rights of indigenous peoples. He drew particular attention to the significance of the knowledge of indigenous peoples about nature and the preservation of biodiversity, which is maintained through their languages. Keller emphasized that biological and linguistic diversity go hand in hand.

He quoted part of the Declaration of the 64th Conference of NGOs, organized by the United Nations in Bonn, Germany (2011) in preparation for the “Rio+20” conference. On that occasion, Keller and the UEA delegation were able to secure the inclusion of several additions to the Declaration, on language rights and Esperanto, including two complete paragraphs, from which he quoted the following: “We call for the respect and inclusion of ethnic languages in the educational system, as those languages comprise the complexity of their respective environments, and consideration of the potential of a neutral international language.”

He also expressed support for the interventions of other participants who alluded to the importance of mother-tongue education and to the disrespect shown to the language rights of indigenous peoples.

Conference addresses linguistic communication in the EU

“Perspectives on Language Communication in the European Union” was the title of a conference held in Nitra, Slovakia, on July 28 and 29, in conjunction with the World Congress of Esperanto. Over one hundred specialists in European language policy convened for the event, and the conference was conducted in three languages – Slovak, English, and Esperanto. Speakers included the former European Commissioner for Multilingualism, Ján Figel (who addressed the conference in English), and the current European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Vytenis Povilas Andriukaitis (who spoke in Esperanto). The conference took place at the University of Constantine the Philosopher. Topics addressed included the current language situation in the EU – both in policy and in practice – and linguistic democracy and social justice, particularly as these affect civic participation and economic integration. The EU’s current crises, many of them with strong linguistic and cultural components, lent a certain urgency to the proceedings. Figel pointed to a decline in linguistic competencies in some EU countries and to a preference for English which weakens other languages. “Now is the time to look for new solutions,” he added. Vytenis Andriukaitis pointed to the need for multilingualism to combat discrimination, and for the development of linguistic competences needed for employment and personal development. We cannot rely on traditional schooling to solve all of these problems: adult education also has an important role to play.

Forum calls for interfaith action

August 15, 2016. More than 150 participants representing 20 nations, three continents and seven world religions as well as other religious, spiritual or humanist traditions met in Nitra, Slovakia, on 25 July, 2016, for a meeting of the Central European Interfaith Forum. The meeting was timed to coincide with the 101st World Congress of Esperanto taking place in Nitra at the same time. As its concluding statement explained, “The Forum (CEIF 2016) convened in Slovakia’s ancient cultural and spiritual centre for fascinating interreligious and civic exchanges in the search for solutions to the growing ethnic, cultural and religious tension in Europe. The alarming trends of nationalism, extremism and xenophobia in our societies, as well as the world’s complex economic, social and political issues, require dialogue between the spiritual authorities, communities and the guiding institutions of this world. This is the kind of dialogue, followed by practical action, that the Central European Interfaith Forum aims to inspire. Accompanied by a policy session on poverty, a lively NGO Forum and a sweeping photo exhibition titled ‘I Saw All Churches of Slovakia’, the Forum culminated with an Interfaith Meeting in Prayer and Thought.”

The Forum offered three “takeaways”:

- In these darkening times, dialogue is essential. True dialogue, however, must be conducted out of respect for the other. True dialogue must also be underpinned by knowledge.
- “Live and let live” is no longer sufficient in a Europe overwhelmed by migration and other challenges. Solidarity in action must be based on the principle “live and help live.”
- Since religions are often perceived as a source of conflict, believers of all religious traditions should play active roles in public life and boldly present the undistorted reality of life as a believer and of religion’s power as a force for good.

A Busy Summer: The Universal Esperanto Association’s UN office a hive of activity

In addition to sending a two-person delegation to the DPI/NGO Conference in Korea at the start of the summer, UEA’s UN liaison office sent two participants to this year’s conference of the Academic Council for UN Studies, meeting at Fordham’s Manhattan campus, and was represented at the 101st World Congress of Esperanto, in Slovakia, where Humphrey Tonkin led a seminar on the United Nations and the SDGs, and presided at the regular congress session on the Association’s activities in at the offices of the UN and UNESCO in New York, Geneva, Vienna, and Paris. Numerous other UN meetings in New York were covered by Allison Thorsen, Humphrey Tonkin, and our summer intern Sam Winkelman, a German Studies major from Centre College, Kentucky. Michael Brandini convened numerous meetings in New York for Esperanto conversation. Humphrey Tonkin also spoke on the Sustainable Development Goals at the conference of the Italian Esperanto Federation in Frascati, and Thorsen and Tonkin represented UEA at the NGO Summit at the end of August. Steven Brewer oversaw a large gift of Esperanto books to the collection at the University of Massachusetts, and Robin Hill and Scott Turton worked on a redesign of the office website. Visitors to New York included François Lo Jacomo, one of UEA’s representatives at UNESCO, and José Antonio Vergara, former UEA board member.

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