

# **Discrimination on Grounds of Language: The Importance of Individual Language Rights**

## **A Position Paper of the Universal Esperanto Association**

*“Our Association believes that linguistic diversity and linguistic understanding can co-exist.”*

### **People should not be excluded because of the language they speak.**

Mere tolerance of diversity is not enough when it comes to language. In order to communicate across languages, we must choose among languages, learn additional languages, and provide language services like interpretation and translation to overcome language differences. Our goal should be to treat everyone as fairly as possible, and to be sensitive to the needs of all. All too frequently, the speakers of major languages ignore the needs of those whose languages are less widely spoken. The result is a high level of frustration, a failure to communicate effectively, resentment, and the suppression of diversity of opinion.

### **Freedom from discrimination on grounds of language is a human right.**

Article 2.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth [in this declaration] without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” In other words, a person cannot be excluded on grounds of the language they speak from enjoyment of the human rights defined in the Declaration. Implied in Article 2.1 is not only an obligation to avoid such discrimination but also an affirmative obligation to make the services of the state – law courts, health services, education, representative government, and other institutions – available to people in languages that they understand.

### **Language, like race or gender, is a marker of identity.**

Language is not only the most basic and comprehensive form of human communication: it is also an important identity-marker. To discriminate on grounds of language is to deny to individuals or sections of the population their right to participate in society and to be heard on equal terms.

### **Unfair discrimination on grounds of language is widely practised.**

Because we must make choices among languages, a fully non-discriminatory policy is hard to apply. Indeed discrimination on grounds of language (sometimes called “linguicism”) is widely practised: language minorities are obliged to use the language of the majority; children are forced to study in languages other than their own; even if there are official non-discriminatory policies in place, in informal or unofficial settings they are often ignored. It is striking that those who would be among the first to condemn discrimination on grounds of race or gender often engage in unfair discrimination in their use of language.

### **Choice of language determines degree of participation.**

While it is possible, with an investment of hard work and good instruction, to acquire new languages, native speakers always enjoy an inherent advantage. Non-native speakers must work harder to express themselves. They tend to participate less in conversation and debate and they may lack the rhetorical skills of native speakers. International organizations such as the United Nations attempt to mitigate this disadvantage by providing conference services in additional languages, but, despite their impressive efforts, these services cannot fully compensate for the prevalence of the English language in informal communication and in meetings where interpretation is not provided. Furthermore the services extend only as far as six languages (in the case of the General Assembly), among the thousands of languages in the world today – and even these six are sometimes unevenly applied, compromising the language parity that is inherent in the UN’s language policy. Native speakers of English enjoy a special advantage, and non-English-speaking Member States tend to choose their representatives with an eye to their proficiency in English. This practice creates a privileged language elite and fosters the impression that English is enough.

Furthermore, the six General Assembly languages, as is the case with representation in the Security Council, reflect the world order of 1945 rather than that of today.

### **The United Nations should re-examine its language policy.**

It would clearly be preferable for a different set of languages to be privileged at the United Nations, representing today’s balance of power. But no State is likely to give up the privileges it currently enjoys, while none of the privileged States seems likely to permit any of these States to have special advantages over the others. The UN struggles to maintain parity among its six languages, given the financial pressures under which it operates, and so it is hardly feasible to expect an expansion of the number of languages served, at least under the current practice of providing interpretation and translation services out of and into all six languages. On occasion it has been proposed that all interpretation, for example, be into English only, thereby allowing for the expansion of the number of languages served – at no extra cost but with considerable reduction in the status of the other five privileged languages. Some years ago, Ambassador Ralph Harry, of Australia, proposed on his own initiative that Esperanto be gradually introduced to serve such a role – namely that in due course all proceedings be interpreted into Esperanto only, and that in the meantime programs be initiated to train interpreters in that language and to provide UN and diplomatic personnel with a passive understanding of the language. While this radical option may seem unfeasible at present, it is in many respects a practical option.

### **Above all, the United Nations should respect its own declarations by insisting on the importance of linguistic non-discrimination, also at the informal level.**

**Linguistic non-discrimination is a well-established principle in such international instruments as the Universal Declaration of**

**Human Rights, but in practice it is far too often neglected. The habitual use of a single language – usually English – in international bodies and activities, creates the illusion of universal comprehension, but in fact excludes all those who do not speak that language and disadvantages those whose knowledge is imperfect. The danger of creating an Anglophone and Anglocentric world order is readily apparent, for example, in the development of Agenda 2030: the Sustainable Development Goals, largely elaborated through the medium of English, have almost nothing to say about language, and give little attention to the fact that two-way communication implies multilingual speaking and listening.**

**The United Nations should take the lead in promoting awareness of unfair discrimination on grounds of language.**

Even if it sometimes seems that the UN lacks the resources to broaden the languages it uses to conduct its business, it could do far more to promote awareness of the often subtle ways in which individuals' language limitations are ignored. These frustrations are often expressed by individuals working in the UN community – but generally in languages other than English. The discrepancy is very obvious when one hears delegates expressing themselves in English, French or Spanish when this language is not their first language. When a mother-tongue speaker takes the floor, often the difference is striking: what they say has much more weight and attracts much more attention than a speaker who is speaking a foreign language. And of course most people in the world do not speak the six languages of the General Assembly: it is all too easy to ignore them and their needs in our planning for their future. The use of a limited range of languages, and the lack of awareness of language difference, makes for top-down planning and ignores bottom-up expression of opinion.

**“The dominance of certain languages ... creates the illusion of a unified global effort.”**

The Final Report of a symposium on language and development recently sponsored by our association and attended by some 120 academics, UN personnel, and others, had this to say on the languages of development: “The dominance of certain languages, particularly English, in international development discourse creates the illusion of a unified global effort. In fact, this dominance has widened the gulf between the Anglophone elites who research, discuss, and write policies, and the billions called on to implement these policies at the individual level, creating levels of frustration that may remain unnoticed by the elites themselves, precisely because of the monolingual environment in which their deliberations take place. Thus, dialogue tends to go in one direction: from the planners to the planned. Often, language prevents dialogue in a spirit of reciprocity and equality between planners and people.”

**Our Association believes that linguistic diversity and linguistic understanding can co-exist.**

We support movements to preserve languages, including those of indigenous peoples. The world's languages are dying out at an alarming rate. When a language dies, a way of life dies with it. At the same time, we promote the international language Esperanto as a non-partisan and neutral bridge among languages – a bridge that allows full language parity. Speakers of Esperanto, in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, are scattered across the world in the majority of the Member States of the United Nations. They believe in language rights, and they decry discrimination on grounds of language.

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