

# Newsletter for March 2019

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## The United Nations at 75: Listening, Talking and Taking Action in a Multilingual World



### Universala Esperanto-Asocio

The Study Group on Language and the United Nations invites you to a Symposium on “The United Nations at 75: Listening, Talking and Taking Action in a Multilingual World” on Thursday & Friday, May 9-10, 2019, at the Church Center, 777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA (First Avenue at 44<sup>th</sup> Street).

The United Nations Charter was signed in San Francisco on June 26, 1945, and came into force on October 24 of that year. Thus the United Nations will celebrate its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the year 2020. For the past 74 years, the United Nations has worked (in the words of the Charter) “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights,” and “to promote social progress.”

In short, it has created a framework of international agreement and cooperation that, though fragile and often threatened, has endured for three generations. What can be done to secure its future?

According to Article 1 (3) of the Charter, among the purposes of the United Nations is the achievement of “international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”

This symposium will give particular attention to the question of language. Although the UN has always promoted dialogue, in recent years it has grown more sensitive to the need for equality in dialogue. In other words, it has become increasingly aware of the need to listen to its constituents rather than simply talking to them, and to understand as well as to be understood. Such concepts are inherent in the Sustainable Development Goals accepted in 2015 and setting the agenda for the UN as it grows closer to its first hundred years.

In a world in which thousands of languages are spoken, is the UN ready for equal dialogue, now and in the future? If not, what is to be done to create linguistic readiness – both in the internal workings of the organization and in its relations with the larger world? These questions have particular relevance in 2019, the UN’s International Year of Indigenous Languages.

Principal speakers at the symposium will be:

**Joseph Lo Bianco.** Professor of Language and Literacy Education, University of Melbourne, Australia; Past President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. A specialist in language policy and planning, in 2012 he designed, led and implemented a four-year, three-country language and peacebuilding initiative for UNICEF in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand. He has published extensively on bilingual education, peacebuilding and communication, multiculturalism and intercultural education, and the revitalisation of indigenous and immigrant community languages.

**Narjess Saidane.** Ambassador Saidane was named Permanent Observer for the International Organization of La Francophonie to the United Nations in 2017. Previously (2013-17) she worked for the UN Development Programme’s (UNDP) Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People, serving from 2013 to 2017 as Deputy Special Representative of the Administrator based in Jerusalem. Previous positions include: Deputy Resident Representative for the Joint Office of UNDP, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Cabo Verde, and similar roles in Mauritania and in her native Tunisia.

**Iris Orriss.** Iris Orriss serves as Director of Internationalization at Facebook. She has been with Facebook since January 2013 and is passionate about eliminating the internet language barrier. Her work focuses on growing Facebook in international markets. In addition, she is a member of the board at Translators without Borders, a nonprofit organization that specializes in providing vital information in the right language at the right time. Before coming to Facebook, she was a director at Microsoft working on product internationalization and development process in the enterprise and language technology divisions. A native of Germany, she was educated at Freie Universität Berlin.

Sponsors of the symposium are the Center for Applied Linguistics, l’Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie; the Esperantic Studies Foundation; the Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems; and the Universal Esperanto Association

The provisional programme and details of registration will be available by mid-March 2019 at [www.languageandtheun.org](http://www.languageandtheun.org).

### Esperanto in the NGO Committee on Education, Learning and Literacy

The February 2019 meeting of the NGO Committee on Education, Learning and Literacy, a standing committee of the Conference of NGOs (CoNGO) took place on Mother Language Day, February 21, and was devoted to the topic of language. Featured were three presentations. Prof. Carol Benson and Erina Iwasaki, of Teachers College, Columbia University, presented the results of their evaluation of

a bilingual program in Senegal; Marcie Craig Post, Executive Director of the International Literacy Association, described the work of her organization; and Humphrey Tonkin, UN representative of the Universal Esperanto Association, discussed his organization's longstanding connection with the work of the United Nations.

UEA, Tonkin pointed out, has a long history of championing human rights – going back to the creator of the language, L.L. Zamenhof, in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Today, he added, the language “plays an important role in education. It is used to good effect in classrooms across the world. In some classrooms it serves as an introduction to language study in general since it is relatively easy to grasp and use. In other classrooms it is put to use as an element in education for global citizenship. So many global citizenship programs rely on English as a medium, which in itself creates a linguistic imbalance. Esperanto can reach beyond the English-speaking bubble to young people who may not know English but have begun to study Esperanto. Thus, everyone is on the same level and the equality that is the basis of global citizenship is preserved and exemplified.”

The UEA's activities at the United Nations are focused particularly on raising the collective consciousness on the importance of language: “Language is at the heart of what the UN does... But that doesn't mean that you can take language for granted... We need to raise the awareness of everyone at the UN about all aspects of language.” As one of the relatively few NGOs directly interested in language, the UEA's first task at the UN, Dr. Tonkin pointed out, must be to sensitize the organization to the need for language equality and maximum linguistic understanding.

## **International Mother Language Day marked by UEA**

The Universal Esperanto Association addressed the following message to the UN and UNESCO on International Mother Language Day, 21 February 2019:

“On 21 February 1952, the police shot and killed numbers of demonstrating students at the University of Dhaka, today the capital of Bangladesh. These students were demonstrating for the recognition of the existence of their mother tongue, Bangla, which the authorities wished to ban from the university in favour of a “bigger” language spoken by those in power at the moment.

“This is a pattern repeated, in various forms, throughout the world and throughout history, for example in connection with indigenous languages, but also with other languages which because of their “weakness” or minority status, are not heard in schools, do not appear in official contexts, are not part of public life, and so lose their recognition and prestige.

“In this way, languages gradually disappear or die, and entire populations lose their intellectual wealth – as many linguists have remarked, and as the United Nations and UNESCO are bringing to our attention in 2019.

“In addition to the social injustice and psychological problems resulting from people's loss of the use of their mother tongue, and in addition to their lack of experience in using a language forced upon them, we should also be aware of other realities: biological and linguistic diversity are indivisible, interconnected, and dependent on one another. The loss of linguistic diversity results in the loss of the traditional knowledge necessary, for example, for sustainable biodiversity and cultural continuity.

“In 1999, UNESCO proclaimed 21 February *International Mother Language Day*, to be celebrated annually. Its first and primary goal is to reiterate the educational advantages of using the mother tongue in schools, particularly primary schools. Children learn to read and write faster in a language that they fully understand – or, more precisely, they suffer a disadvantage if they are obliged to begin their learning in a language that they *do not* understand, either partially or completely.

“In her message to the 103<sup>rd</sup> World Congress of Esperanto in 2018, Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, declared: “Our Organization shares with the Esperanto movement common values: the aim of building a peaceful world, empathy among the peoples, respect for cultural diversity, solidarity across borders.”

“The Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) congratulates UNESCO and the United Nations on its growing attention to linguistic diversity, but emphasizes that sufficient attention is still not being paid to the question of linguistic justice and linguistic equality. As one of the few nongovernmental organizations concerned with questions of language, UEA calls on UNESCO and the United Nations to give greater emphasis to linguistic justice in all areas, particularly in education.”

Further information: <http://www.esperantoporun.org/> <http://www.linguistic-rights.org/>

## **International Women's Day, 8 March 2019: A message from the Universal Esperanto Association**

*The Universal Esperanto Association salutes the world's women, and particularly the members of the worldwide Esperanto community, on the occasion of International Women's Day 2019. In its role as an international language promoting direct and unfiltered dialogue among the citizens of the world, Esperanto is uniquely positioned to help women everywhere communicate with one another across the barriers of distance and language, to exchange views and ideas, and to organize for action on behalf of women's rights.*

*We recognize that there is much to be done. Despite significant progress in Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which is concerned with education, women's education lags behind men's. Too many children lack access to education, and this is particularly true of girls. Of those children who have access to education, too many girls drop out of school early, before they are able to develop their own particular skills or prepare themselves for careers.*

*At the same time, the UEA recognizes and honours the leading role women play in movements for linguistic and cultural revitalization, and for the protection of the domestic sphere from oppression and discrimination. Such efforts are an essential part of the struggle to establish a world where many cultures and languages can coexist in harmony – a topic of special importance in this International Year of Indigenous Languages, and particularly important for our Association in its efforts to achieve linguistic equality.*

Accordingly, we express our solidarity with movements to end discrimination against women and girls, and to build a sustainable future in which all people are treated with equal care and respect, irrespective of language, culture, gender, and other forms of diversity.

## **UEA assists translation of Universal Declaration of Human Rights into American Sign Language**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recently (10 December 2018) celebrated its 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, is among the most translated documents in the world, and surely one of the most important. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, the document is available in 518 different translations in HTML and/or PDF format – from Abkhaz to Zulu. Among the recent additions is American Sign Language (ASL): see <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/UDHRinsignlanguages.aspx>.

The ASL translation was added as a result of the intervention of the Universal Esperanto Association, working with the American School for the Deaf, in Hartford, Connecticut. The American School for the Deaf, founded in 1817, was the place where American Sign Language was born. ASL is quite different from British Sign Language and most resembles French Sign Language, from which it was derived.

Sign languages, as opposed to *signed* languages, are complete and independent languages in themselves, independent of the dominant languages spoken in the areas where they are used. They display the full range of grammar, syntax and lexical elements as can be found in spoken languages.

The UDHR is available also in Esperanto, in a translation crafted in the early 1950s by a team that included Ralph Harry, later Permanent Representative of Australia to the UN, and Ivo Lapenna, professor of international law and later president of the Universal Esperanto Association. See: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/Language.aspx?LangID=1115>. The High Commission's website notes that, "Our goal is to share the UDHR with the entire world, and anyone is welcome to contribute a new translation that is not already in the collection."

## **Happy birthday, Sir Brian! UEA salutes Sir Brian Urquhart on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday**

It was in 1991 that the Universal Esperanto Association awarded Brian Urquhart its Zamenhof Prize in recognition of his many years of service to the United Nations. On February 28, he celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, to a chorus of praise from international officials and peacemakers the world over. Sir Brian was there at the beginning – when the UN first came into being – and, as Secretary-General António Guterres pointed out in his birthday greeting, "He set the standard for the international civil service: principled, dedicated, impartial." Sir Brian served as an aide to Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and worked closely with Ralph Bunche in establishing the UN's role in international peacekeeping – work particularly recognized by the UEA in its award of the Zamenhof Prize.

Other recipients of the Zamenhof Prize have included James Grant, Director of UNICEF, Marti Ahtisaari, President of Finland, and Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO.

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