

Universal Esperanto Association: Message to the United Nations and to UNESCO on the occasion of 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 103rd 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.

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