

# Esperanto and the UN

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Universala Esperanto-Asocio

## **Record numbers at Symposium**

### **Experiencing and remembering migration: The trauma of language**

With 1052 registrations located in 51 countries, this year's *Symposium on Language and the United Nations* exceeded all expectations. Under the topic "Language and Migration: Experience and Memory," the virtual event consisted of seven sessions spread over a two-week period, from April 19 to May 1. Sessions dealt with such topics as Linguistic Human Rights, Interpretation and Translation, Media and Representation, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants and the State.

Principal organizer was the Migration Lab at Princeton University. Cooperating organizations included Birkbeck, University of London; the Center for Applied Linguistics (Washington DC); the Center for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems (publisher of the journal *Language Problems and Language Planning*), and the Esperantic Studies Foundation.

The newly established NGO Committee on Language and Languages, of which the Universal Esperanto Association is a member, also sponsored the event. UEA representative to the UN Humphrey Tonkin addressed the symposium's opening session, along with Princeton University professor Esther Schor, the principal organizer of the symposium.

The United Nations calculates that currently almost 80 million people are forcibly displaced from their places of residence. Over a third of them are children. There appears to be no end in sight to this humanitarian disaster. A large number of the displaced persons are in regions speaking different languages from their own, leading to difficulties in dealing with the authorities, educational disruptions, and friction with the local population.

As the notice of the symposium pointed out, "Language is a vital, but underexplored, factor in the lives of migrants, immigrants and refugees. It has a direct impact on the experiences and choices of individuals displaced by war, terror, or natural disasters and the decisions made by agents who provide (or fail to provide) relief, services, and status. Distilled through memory, it shapes the fictions, poems, memoirs, films and song lyrics in which migrants render loss and displacement, integration and discovery, the translation of history and culture, and the trials of identity."

And yet, as some speakers pointed out, free and unimpeded migration has played a significant role in bringing people together, bridging cultures, enriching the arts, and promoting international understanding.

Traditionally, the annual symposium, held at the Church Center right next to the UN headquarters building, attracts numbers of UN officials, diplomats and NGO representatives. This year, because the symposium was virtual, attendees were primarily social scientists, field-workers and policy-makers, artists and writers; UN voices were less prominent. Organizers are already considering the possibility of arranging the symposium next year as a one-day in-person event in New York to engage the UN more directly, coupled with a one-day virtual event to attract worldwide participation – again dealing with aspects of migration and refugees.

The symposium opened with an address by Sarah Dryden-Peterson, of Harvard University, on language, migration and education, and concluded with readings by writers Jhumpa Lahiri, Yiyun Lee and Aleksandar Hemon, and a moving and powerful address by novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen. Details of the programme are still available at <https://migration.princeton.edu/symposium/program>.

A final report is now in preparation by graduate students from Teachers College, Columbia University, and from the University of Maryland Baltimore County. The report should be available by early August.

## **Language Days at the UN: Esperanto-speakers have their say**

Shakespeare's birthday, April 23, is English Language Day at the UN. This year, a coalition of national Esperanto associations from countries where English is spoken issued a statement reminding the UN that, while "twenty percent of the world's population uses English as a first, second or additional language," eighty percent does not. "Truly global communication requires a broad repertoire of languages to foster dialogue, disseminate knowledge, and promote sustainable development," the statement declared. While acknowledging the importance of English, the Esperanto associations of Canada, South Africa, the UK and the USA called on the UN community and civil society "to reflect on the place of English in the multilingual ecology of the world's languages."

With Russian Language Day due to take place on June 6, the Russian Esperantist Union offered its own message. "The Russian language is the most widely spoken Slavic language and the eighth most spoken language in the world.... It is also the second most widely used content language in the Internet.... Russian is one of the official languages of the United Nations and is widely used as an auxiliary language in international relations." However, the REU explained, "there exist at least two hundred other languages," in countries where Russian is official, many of them unofficial or endangered.

"Language rights are essential for all peoples, independently of the number of speakers, and this right must be protected, particularly for smaller groups. For this reason REU, and, through it, UEA, invites everyone to an awareness of the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity."

## Esperanto meetings: Part virtual, part in-person

With the intended congress site taken over to serve as a vaccination centre, the Universal Esperanto Association abandoned plans for its in-person world congress, due to take place in Belfast, Northern Ireland in July, and has gone virtual. This will be the second year in a row when the in-person event has instead gone on-line. If the year 2020 is a guide, attendance in 2021 will exceed an in-person event by as much as a factor of ten. The year 2021 has been proclaimed by the United Nations as the Year of Peace and Trust – and this will form the principal theme of the congress. Dates are 17-24 July.

Esperanto USA will also meet virtually in June (<https://ttt.esperanto-usa.org/eusa/congress/2021/en>) . On the other hand, the Italian Esperanto Federation is going ahead with its in-person annual congress, to take place from 20 to 27 August in Assisi (<https://kongreso.esperanto.it/88/>) on “Communication across differences as a path to peace.” So far, over 150 people have registered.

The latest issue (number 43) of the newsletter *Esperanto en Afriko* announces that Dakar, Senegal, will be the venue for the 8<sup>th</sup> African Congress of Esperanto, to take place from 26 to 30 December, 2022.

## UEA on families, technology and the pandemic

“The COVID-19 pandemic has put families and family structures in a central position during a period when in many countries personal physical contact is made difficult, the education of children is interrupted, working conditions have been turned upside-down, and too many families are suffering through illness or the loss of family members,” declared the Universal Esperanto Association in its message commemorating the International Day of Families, May 15. “We extend our sentiments of solidarity to all families who have lost family members or whose family life has suffered because of the present extraordinary circumstances.”

The message focused particularly on the digital divide and its linguistic implications: “The pandemic has shown the importance of digital technologies for work, education and communication, speeding up technological change, for example the widespread use of digital platforms, cloud computing, and the aggregation of data and algorithms. These advances have allowed great flexibility in work and education, but have also produced negative effects such as screen fatigue and digital fraud.”

“Such are the experiences of Esperanto speakers who make widespread use of communication technology to communicate at a distance, to substitute for in-person conferences and meetings, and to link children from different countries,” UEA’s message added. “Through Esperanto, parents can exchange information, experiences and knowledge about childhood education... We recommend that everyone use the new technologies to educate children better and to improve family life, and employ the International Language Esperanto to maintain solidarity not only within families but across the entire human family, which, not only because of the pandemic, is today under extraordinary pressure. May the International Day of Families especially remind us about those families who are suffering because of wars, because of sickness and hunger, and because of difficulties of communication with their sisters and brothers across the world.”

## **Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development: Esperanto-speakers congratulate and encourage UNESCO and the UN**

“The Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) greets the United Nations and UNESCO on the occasion of the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, 21 May 2021,” reads a recent statement from UEA. “The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong negative effect on the cultural sector: cancelled events, cultural organizations closed, community cultural practices curtailed, along with other challenges, have inflicted social, economic and political damage on populations everywhere.

“The Unesco Constitution declares that ‘ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of ... suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world.’ In fact, most conflicts around the world have a cultural dimension. For that reason, open intercultural dialogue is necessary for peace, stability and development. Cultural diversity is a leading force for development – not only economic, but also social, intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual development. Culture also influences our relations with the natural world. Thus, UNESCO has already put its name to many conventions, declarations and recommendations to advance cultural diversity. Some are available also in Esperanto, among them UNESCO’s [Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity](#).

“UEA congratulates UNESCO on its initiatives to advance and disseminate the principles of cultural diversity in a difficult and challenging time. The Esperanto movement seeks to do the same in many activities and initiatives in Esperanto through the worldwide web. Particularly welcome in this regard is the International Year of Peace and Trust, the theme of the [2nd Virtual Esperanto Congress](#), from 17 to 24 July. The UN General Assembly Resolution on the [International Year of Peace and Trust](#) acknowledges that “peace and trust entail accepting differences and having the ability to listen to, recognize, respect and appreciate others, as well as living in a peaceful and united way.” Important in this regard is knowledge of one’s own and other cultures, openness and communication and dialogue...

“Language and culture are intimately connected. For this reason, we invite everyone to use Esperanto for international exchanges free of the discrimination that comes with national languages. In this way the free flow of ideas is advanced through words and pictures, and space is established where all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known. Particularly important to the Esperanto movement are freedom of expression, media pluralism, multilingualism, and equal access to art and to science and technology.”

“In addition to the already noted activities of UEA and its partner the World Esperantist Youth Organization, we might also emphasize the book series [Oriento-Okcidento](#) (East-West) with 62 published works in Esperanto translation, the Esperanto versions of [Global Voices](#) with over 570 published articles, and the Esperanto [Vikipedio](#) (Wikipedia) with over 296,000 articles.”

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