

# Esperanto and the UN

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Universala Esperanto-Asocio

## **A question for the Secretary-General: Multilingualism and the United Nations**

The Universal Esperanto Association, recognizing the sympathetic attention that Secretary General Guterres has given to questions of multilingualism in the UN, promoting the importance of communicating with people in languages they understand, and listening to the responses, recently took the opportunity to address a question on language to Mr Guterres in a recent UN meeting concerning his candidacy for a second term:

*“With its six official languages, multilingualism is central to the cooperative problem-solving work of the United Nations. In addition, with the urgent need to build back after COVID-19 and the vital work of striving for the Sustainable Development Goals, communicating with civil society in languages people understand is more important than ever. As an NGO in consultative status with the UN that promotes peace through intercultural understanding, the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) asks the candidates how they will advance multilingualism in day-to-day work throughout the UN community and in communication with civil society.”*

While the question, posed by Prof. Francis Hult, one of the representatives of UEA to the United Nations, was not chosen by the committee responsible for the meeting, it represents an important part of the agenda of the Universal Esperanto Association in its work with the United Nations. More and more frequently we are told that the UN must listen to the many voices of the peoples of the world – but that implies understanding their languages, dealing with them on their terms rather than ours. Conversation goes two ways: listening and understanding is every bit as important as talking. When will the UN give the question of language the constructive attention that it needs?

## **Worldwide course attracts Spanish-speakers to Esperanto**

In addition to numerous courses in Esperanto available on-line and in countries across the world, the Universal Esperanto Association, in co-operation with TEJO, the World Esperanto Youth Organization and Esperanto associations in Colombia and Spain, recently organized a short-term global course in Esperanto for Spanish-speakers that attracted over 500 participants, primarily from Colombia, Mexico, Argentina, Spain, Peru and the United States. Twelve instructors, from Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador, Argentina, and Venezuela, led the group, bringing participants to a conversational level at which they could participate fully in the international Esperanto community.

## Esperanto Day and International Friendship Day 2021

The week of 25-30 July is of special importance to the Esperanto-speaking community.

July 26, 2021, is the 134<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the International Language Esperanto and is celebrated within the Esperanto movement as **Esperanto Day**. The initiator of the language, Dr. L.L. Zamenhof worked tirelessly for the promotion of peace and understanding, and for the friendship of the peoples of the world. In those early years, many individuals and organizations adopted Esperanto and used it for the promotion of peace. Today, there are speakers of Esperanto all over the world,



numbering in the millions and located in the majority of Member States of the United Nations. With the example of their founder Zamenhof, they work to bring people together in the spirit of peace and trust.

July 30 is **International Friendship Day**. Ten years ago, in 2011, the UN General Assembly declared this day the International Day of Friendship, building on UNESCO's call, some fourteen years before, for the creation of a Culture of Peace, "a set of values, attitudes and behaviours that reject violence and endeavour to prevent conflicts by addressing their root causes."

Among those root causes is a lack of understanding among the peoples of the world, and among the root causes of that lack of understanding is the issue of language.

We the people, quite literally, can't understand one another.

All across the world there are people who are underprivileged, who live in poverty, who suffer from want and disease, who are powerless in the hands of those in power and are displaced from their homes by war and natural disasters. Many of them speak languages the rest of us do not understand: even if we try to listen, we cannot understand them. Far too many of us are insensitive to these differences of language, as Dr. Zamenhof sought to make clear a century or more ago.

Many of them are losing their languages: minority and indigenous languages are dying out, along with the history and knowledge associated with them.

The Universal Esperanto Association, and the Esperanto-speaking community of which it is a part, are deeply committed to bringing people together across boundaries geographic and economic, across differences of race and religion, class and social status, politics and ideology. Friendship and fellow-feeling are not mere "soft values" but the very underpinning of peace and trust.

This year's virtual congress of Esperanto, which brought thousands of people together, ended on July 24. Its principal theme was **Peace and Trust**, in recognition of the International Year of Peace and Trust

declared by UNESCO and the United Nations for 2021. We dare to hope that in this year of pandemic and of natural disasters, when trust among the peoples is being put to the test as never before, the world will rise to the occasion.

On Esperanto Day, we speakers of Esperanto, who have spent the past few days at our annual congress talking of peace and furthering trust, rededicate ourselves to the promotion of understanding and, on the occasion of the International Day of Friendship, to the friendship that the world so desperately needs. **Friendship depends on trust; trust depends on understanding – and friendship, trust and understanding depend on a realistic assessment of the world’s needs at a time when our very existence is threatened.**

## World Esperanto congress is again virtual



Some 2000 people registered for this year’s virtual Esperanto congress, which replaced what was to have been an in-person event in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in July. The week-long congress program contains business meetings, cultural events, lectures, and a range of other activities, including a virtual auction, communal meals with participants from many countries, and virtual tours. Next year’s congress will take place in person in Montreal, postponed from two years ago and replaced in 2020 by a World Festival of Esperanto that attracted over 10,000 participants.

## Youth for linguistic rights in a time of COVID

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the way to recovery was the topic of a side event at the UN’s High Level Political Forum on July 12, organized by the World Esperanto Youth Organization (TEJO) in cooperation with the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA). The meeting focused on linguistic rights: the fundamental right of all individuals to choose their language or languages for communication in the private or public sphere. More than one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, international institutions and organizations have observed and reported on the lack of respect and several violations of fundamental human rights. Linguistic rights are no exception; in fact, they have been negatively affected by the rapid transition of the majority of professional, educational, personal, and social activities to an online environment. During the COVID-19 crisis, researchers are highlighting the need for public health officials to provide information in a range of languages and especially to provide public health information for indigenous people all over the world. What is the role of young people in this regard, especially in post-recovery societies?

Speakers at the event were Cecilia Gialdini, an Italian research student at Ulster University in Northern Ireland working on language policy and planning in disasters, and Professor Francis Hult, a specialist on language education and language policy from the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

Objectives of the side event were (1) to raise awareness of the importance of linguistic rights and especially how they have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) to highlight the relation of linguistic rights to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDGs 3, 4, 10, 16 and 17, and (3) to raise awareness on language discrimination generally. The meeting showed how speakers of minority languages are often excluded in the formulation and application of policy, and how decision-makers can, if they choose to do so, include them. The event also provided an opportunity for forming coalitions among youth organizations and for networking.

## **Esperanto association congratulates UN Secretary-General on re-election**

Pledging his organization's support in the years ahead, President Duncan Charters of the Universal Esperanto Association recently congratulated UN Secretary-General António Guterres on his re-election, praising his particular attention to issues of language.

"Given our special interest in linguistic justice and the promotion of better and more egalitarian communication among speakers of the world's languages," wrote Professor Charters, "we are particularly pleased by your efforts to extend multilingualism and linguistic parity in the work of the United Nations. We fully agree with your emphasis on the fact that we must listen to the peoples of the world on their terms rather than ours, and in their own languages."

Professor Charters recalled Secretary-General Guterres' own words in his acceptance speech, in which the Secretary-General declared that he would do all that he could "to ensure the blossoming of trust between and among nations large and small, to build bridges, and to engage relentlessly in confidence building." Charters drew attention to the report recently issued by the UN's Joint Inspection Unit on language use at the UN and its positive response to the emphasis on multilingualism.

"The Esperanto-speaking community stands ready to help through our resources in whatever ways we can contribute." Charters wrote. "Since this is the International Year of Peace and Trust," he added, "our Association is giving particular emphasis to this as the major theme of our 2021 virtual world congress which takes place later this month. We will follow up with continuing education of our members, and have found that the past year's virtual environment has been especially conducive to promoting this kind of ongoing dialogue."

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