

Esperanto and the UN

Newsletter of the Universal Esperanto Association's Office of Liaison with the United Nations

Number 75, March-April 2025



Universala Esperanto-Asocio

Esperanto speakers across the world celebrate Mother Language Day



Highly conscious of the human right to language, Esperanto speakers are strong supporters of mother tongue education and the right of children to begin their education in the language that they understand best – their mother language. No one should fall behind because of the language they were born with: all children should have equal educational opportunity. This February 21 marked the 25th anniversary of the worldwide celebration of Mother language Day, a celebration launched by UNESCO at the start of the new millennium and regularly marked by the Universal Esperanto Association with meetings, festivities and special bulletins.

According to this year's message, the special day “reminds us of the importance of languages for personal development and social participation., and particularly of the right to begin one's education in one's native language, thereby maximizing self-development and participation in society from the beginning of life.”

“Decline in linguistic diversity,” the message continues, “is often related to decline in cultural diversity and biodiversity. Languages carry knowledge and experience from generation to generation: languages accompany us everywhere and in every action of life: in the home, in education, in political participation, in the arts and sciences.”

The message goes on to note UEA's active participation in UNESCO's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), “whose goal is to advance the linguistic human rights of indigenous peoples and to guarantee the conservation, revival and expansion of mother tongues.”

The Universal Esperanto Association devoted its congress of 2022 to the International Decade. Its message points out that “languages are important for sustainable development and for full participation in society. Questions of language have not received sufficient attention in the general debate on the Sustainable Development Goals.”

In 2020 UEA published in Esperanto its *Guide to the 17 Goals for Sustainable Development* (<https://esperantoporun.org/eo/publikajoj/>). “The Guide points out,” says the message “that

without effective linguistic communication the Goals cannot be fully realized – because languages form the basis of communication, and communication in both directions is necessary for working together: languages are for speaking but also for listening.”

According to the message, “The Guide underlines the importance of language learning to maximize dialogue aimed at achieving a common goal: peace, prosperity and mutual understanding. It notes that, among such languages, the idea behind the international language Esperanto particularly emphasizes equality, peace and cooperation.”

NGO Committee addresses indigenous languages

In a lively discussion on Zoom on 28 January 2025, upwards of 200 people from over 30 countries around the world, representing many languages, came together for a Roundtable Discussion on Indigenous Language Rights, sponsored by the NGO Committee on Language and Languages, a substantive committee of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO). The meeting was chaired by Francis M. Hult, of the Universal Esperanto Association, chair of the NGO Committee.

The participants represented a wide range of backgrounds, including teachers of indigenous languages, leaders in indigenous communities, university professors, legal experts, community organizers, and representatives of international organizations and NGOs.

The Round Table featured seven primary discussants: Vital Bambanze (Burundi), member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; Leslie Harper, of the Ojibwe Nation, programme director of the National Native American Language Resource Center; Hanna-Maret Outakoski, professor at the Sámi University of Applied Sciences; Jaco du Toit, Chief of Universal Access to Information and Digital Inclusion, UNESCO; Anton Treuer, professor at Bemidji State University, USA; Barbara Grudell, Senior Consultant, SIL Africa Learning & Development; and Hernan Vales (of Argentina), Chief of Indigenous Peoples and minorities Section, Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights. The Chair of the NGO Committee on Language and Languages, Prof. Francis Hult, served as moderator, and Prof. Humphrey Tonkin, vice-chair of the Committee, offered concluding remarks.

The wide-ranging 90-minute discussion included the following points:

- Many languages described as indigenous are used by small populations within larger states whose official languages are different, or by populations that cross national boundaries. Historically, these populations have often been excluded from full political, economic and cultural participation.
- Convincing national governments to pay attention to these minorities, and to provide them with resources (for education, for cultural preservation, and to preserve and increase economic viability) is difficult. Where national boundaries divide those communities, it is particularly hard to move resources and harmonize policies to address real needs.

- Such problems are particularly acute in parts of the world with high levels of linguistic and cultural diversity, such as the continent of Africa.
- While issues of linguistic diversity and language maintenance are deemed important in some areas and countries of the world, in other areas and countries they receive little attention from governments. Accordingly it is difficult to create consensus leading to action around such issues, even in international bodies such as UNESCO and the United Nations.
- International efforts such as the Decade of Indigenous Languages declared by UNESCO (2022-2032) help by giving visibility to language issues, enhancing cooperation, and stimulating international and local programming and resources. Such efforts give visibility to language rights, to the overall recognition of language as a human right, and to the imbalance of power among languages for historical, social or political reasons.
- Language is such a basic human activity that it is often taken for granted. Thus language is largely ignored in the Sustainable Development Goals (it is mentioned in passing in SDG 4, but not at all in SDG16 – and nowhere else in the SDGs). Yet the reality is that language is utterly basic to human cooperation and hence to the SDGs themselves: it is at once everywhere and nowhere.
- To put it simply, language is participation – and not just speaking languages but listening in language. Language minorities have important insights to offer in support of cooperation, if we are willing to listen.
- Workers in the field and language specialists have much to learn by sharing best practices, by examining language policies, and by bringing discourses together in a spirit of cooperation and flexibility. The Decade and other international efforts help stimulate such cooperation, as do events such as the present Round Table.

Worldwide celebration of Zamenhof Day



Zamenhof Day, December 15, the birth date in 1859 of Ludwik Zamenhof, creator of Esperanto, is celebrated worldwide by the Esperanto movement. Reports of the celebration are still coming in from various parts of the world. Among the highlights: a special night-time illumination of Rio de Janeiro's famous statue of Christ the Redeemer – in green, the signature colour of Esperanto.

The statue of Christ the Redeemer, 125 feet (38 metres) tall, is one of the best known Brazilian monuments. Voted one of the new Seven Wonders of the World in the 2007 campaign of the "New 7 Wonders" (N7W) Foundation, it stands in the city of Rio de Janeiro on the 2329 feet (710 metres) high Mount Corcovado, and can be seen throughout the city and even from neighbouring locations, such as the nearby city of Niterói. The illumination came about thanks to activists in the Esperantist Association of Rio de Janeiro (AER) and the Niterói Esperanto Club.

Also crucially important were the auspices of the Archbishop of Rio, Cardinal Orani Tempesta, and the enthusiastic support of the priest responsible for the Sanctuary of Christ the Redeemer,

Father Omar Raposo. These individuals, who are fully supportive of the understanding that Esperanto is a language to bring the peoples of the world together, made this memorable activity possible.

Initial Grégoire Maertens Prize awarded to Stela Besenyei-Merger

The newly launched Maertens Prize honours Esperanto organizations or individuals whose activities have made and will continue to make major contributions to the development of the Esperanto movement. Recipients of the prize are chosen by a jury of former presidents and board members of UEA. The Prize was announced in 2024 to honour centenarian Grégoire Maertens, UEA president from 1980 to 1986 and an active Esperantist from World War II down to today. Among his early activities: accompanying the young Esperantist George Soros to a congress of young Esperanto speakers in Britain. Soros stayed on in Britain and began his career as a financier.

In its inaugural year 2025, the Grégoire Maertens Prize was awarded to **Stela Besenyei-Merger** for her original, inspiring and diverse contributions to the organizational and cultural life of the Esperanto movement.

Stela Besenyei-Merger is a native speaker of Esperanto, daughter of a French father and Hungarian mother. Without doubt, she is one of the native Esperanto speakers best-known outside the Esperanto movement through her short introductory [video](#) with subtitles, made in 2020 under the auspices of *Wikitongues*, with over 800,000 views to date. She also contributed notably to documentation of the native-speaker phenomenon with a series of podcast interviews with native speakers and their parents, in her [blog](#) “Stela ĉiam nur kritikis” (Stella does nothing but criticise) and in her [website](#) “La bona renkontiĝo” (The Good Meeting: <https://www.laboren.org/>) – research and educational work that is still ongoing.

Stela grew up in an Esperanto environment, participating in family events and youth meetings from birth. Her earliest contribution to the organization, she asserts, was – at the age of six – teaching origami to children and adults. Her years of experience of Esperanto meetings, as participant and as organizer, ultimately convinced her to compile a unique manual for organizers in the form of a [podcast series](#) entitled “La bona renkontiĝo” (The Good Meeting). In 2017 and 2018 she published some twenty half-hour episodes, which, in the words of one of her nominators, “provide extremely useful advice for organizing teams at every level, from new volunteers to experienced organizers.”

In April 2021 Stela joined the team of literature-lovers now known as [Bobelarto](#). Beginning by helping organize the first edition of the Intercultural Short Story Competition (Interkultura Novel-Konkurso: INK), she drew on her earlier experience, leading writing workshops and reading groups to create live readings of competition entries by multiple voices. Next she introduced the Esperanto Movement Writing Month *Movada Verk-Monato* ([MoVeMo](#), launched in November 2021), the day of literary events [Literatura Duonmaratono](#) (Literary Half-Marathon, begun in March 2023) and the web-based Writing Weeks ([Verk-Semajnoj](#), as of April 2024). These initiatives helped to create one of the most lively and culturally active communities of Esperantists on the web, opening a new phase in Esperanto’s reading and writing traditions.

UEA mourns the passing of a much-loved activist and former president

It was with great sorrow that the Esperanto movement learned of the death, in London on February 1, of Renato Corsetti, 83, former president (2001-2007) of the Universal Esperanto Association, recently named as its honorary president. Dr. Corsetti, economist and linguist, learned Esperanto in the 1960s and soon became active in the international Esperanto movement both as a member of a Rome-based Esperanto cabaret and, in due course, as president of TEJO (the World Esperanto Youth Organization). He later occupied numerous other leadership positions, among them the presidency of the Italian Esperanto Federation.

As president of UEA, Renato Corsetti was a strong advocate for collective grassroots action and for engagement of Esperanto speakers in the campaign for human rights. For many years professor of psycholinguistics at La Sapienza University in Rome, Dr. Corsetti argued, as a member of the Esperanto Academy, for keeping Esperanto simple and easy to learn. Upon retirement he and his wife Anna Lowenstein moved to London, where he remained active in the local Esperanto movement and also worldwide. His was a particularly influential voice in the Esperanto movement on the African continent and in the study of Esperanto and interlinguistics in universities. He also strongly supported the Universal Esperanto Association's work at the United Nations.

He will be sorely missed.