

## RE-VISITING MULTILINGUALISM IN DIPLOMATIC FORA

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of multilingualism may be described by considering it as a linguistic ability/behavior of the members of a speech community which may alternately use two, three or more languages depending on specific circumstances. It may be understood also as the use of several languages by an individual or within a speech community. As a UN specialized agency and an active institution in the field of cultural diplomacy, UNESCO pursues the promotion of the right of each and every individual to self-development in

the language and culture of his/her own origin and choice. Language rights are treated as a component of human rights. States have the duty not to take discriminatory measures on language grounds and to act in conformity with major international standard-setting or legal instruments.

A significant event was the World Conference devoted to language rights, organized with the support of UNESCO in Barcelona, in June 1996. Its main achievement was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights. UNESCO has taken initiatives for encouraging research and

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developing actions aimed at solving language problems of specific groups and is also involved in the preparation of an international convention on linguistic rights, as well as in the adoption of national and regional arrangements for the protection of linguistic diversity.

In 2001 the UN General Assembly had on its agenda the item entitled Multilingualism and a report of the UN Secretary-General on that issue which establishes the framework for the question by distinguishing between official and working languages in various parts of the United Nations system. All are some combination of Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, which are both the official and working languages of the General Assembly and Security Council. The article examines in detail the diplomatic consideration of this item which led on 15 February 2002 to the adoption by consensus of resolution A/RES/56/262 which states that genuine multilingualism promotes unity in diversity and international understanding. The author emphasizes the topicality of UNESCO's recommendations concerning the importance of multilingualism for the promotion of multiculturalism on global information networks and comes to the conclusion that relevant non-governmental organizations in the field of higher education can bring a valuable contribution to enlarging cooperation between universities at the international, regional, sub-regional

and national levels in a promising multilingual environment.

## **I. PRELIMINARIES**

According to the dictionaries, multilingual means able to speak more than two languages with approximately equal facility or spoken or written in more than two languages. The phenomenon of multilingualism may be described if not defined by considering it simply as a linguistic ability/ behavior of the members of a speech community which may alternately use two, three or more languages, depending on specific circumstances. It may be understood also as the use of several languages by an individual or within a speech community. In many cases multilingual people do not have equal command of all languages they use. Multilingualism is the norm in many African and Asian countries.<sup>1</sup>

A professional contact with the notion and practice of multilingualism is obvious in a diplomatic context. At the United Nations, a consensus idea is that the universality of the United Nations and its corollary, multilingualism, entail for each Member State of the Organization, irrespective of the official language in which it expresses itself, the right and the duty to make itself understood and to understand others. That was in fact the substance of the first preambular paragraph of resolution

50/11 entitled Multilingualism adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 2 November 1995 by a recorded vote of 100 countries in favour, 35 against, 29 abstentions, while 13 countries were absent during the voting process.<sup>2</sup>

In a non-governmental environment offered by the good offices of the Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific (AUAP) it was cogently pointed out that “The spread of English represents a serious cultural and psychological imposition, say many in countries where it isn’t a native language. To get the same sense, Americans need only imagine having to learn their calculus in German, or their psychology in Chinese. “Every country loves its own culture and language,” says Ruben Umaly, secretary general of the Association of Universities of Asia Pacific, which is based in Thailand and uses English as its official language. But English is increasingly the language of international business and communications, he says, and “we cannot avoid globalization.” Some countries have tried. Flushed with the national pride that accompanied the wave of decolonization after World War II, many new nations initially resisted the intrusion of English, seeing it as a threat to their own languages, long neglected under colonial rule. But in the last few years, with students and their parents clamoring for more English, which they regard as a passport to better careers, countries

have increasingly opted for what some already call “the world language”.<sup>3</sup> What was the response given to that fundamental preoccupation in the main fora of multilateral diplomacy ?

As a UN specialized agency and an active institution in the field of cultural diplomacy UNESCO pursues the promotion of the right of each and every individual to self-development in the language and culture of his/her own origin and choice. Language rights are treated as a component of human rights. States have the duty not to take discriminatory measures on language grounds, in conformity with major international standard-setting or legal instruments, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights adopted by the United Nations on 10 December 1948, and the Convention against Discrimination in Education adopted by UNESCO in 1960.

In addition, there are also international normative instruments dealing with linguistic rights per se. The most important is the Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted by consensus by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1992. This document whose implementation is considered by the United Nations every year stresses the protection of linguistic identity of minorities and outlines conditions for the promotion of that identity. Among documents adopted at regional level,

the best known is the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages of 5 November 1992 which foresees the adoption of language and cultural policies geared to the specific local, national and regional contexts of European countries. Its Preamble stresses the value of interculturalism and multilingualism, while considering that the protection and encouragement of regional or minority languages should not be to the detriment of the official languages and the need to learn them.

A significant event was the World Conference devoted to language rights, organized with the support of UNESCO in Barcelona, in June 1996. Its main achievement was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights. In its Preamble the Declaration stresses the impossibility “for many languages to survive and develop unless the following basic goals are taken into account:

1. in a political perspective, organising linguistic diversity so as to permit the effective participation of language communities in development;
2. in a cultural perspective, rendering the world-wide communications space compatible with the equitable participation of all peoples, language communities and individuals in the development process, and
3. in an economic perspective, fostering sustainable development of societies

all languages and cultures.”<sup>4</sup>

However, in spite of its obvious specificity the Barcelona Declaration is not a mandatory legal instrument. Moreover, it should be stressed that there is no generally applicable international legal instrument to protect languages. That is the reason for which UNESCO has taken initiatives for encouraging research and developing actions aimed at solving language problems of specific groups. UNESCO is also involved in the preparation of an international convention on linguistic rights, as well as in the adoption of national and regional arrangements for the protection of linguistic diversity.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most interesting documents devoted to multilingualism and publicized in Asia is a message from the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan which was read out on 14 November 1997 by former United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, at the Francophone Summit in Hanoi. The substance of the message on multilingualism may be summarized as follows:

Sharing a common language often makes it easier to understand situations and the forces that underlie them and to communicate more directly with the parties involved. The beautiful French language is much more than a means of communication. It is also, traditionally, the language of diplomacy and the

medium of the humanist ideal. It fashions a community of values, a convergence of ideas that far transcends the prickly defence of narrow interests. As a firm believer in cultural pluralism and multilingualism, the Secretary-General supports the commitment to a diversity of identities, cultures and languages. This determination to preserve diversity is particularly welcome at a time of increasing globalization which, while clearly offering new economic opportunities, also runs the risk of imposing uniformity on our world.<sup>6</sup>

The General Conference of UNESCO decided at its 30<sup>th</sup> Session (November 1999) to proclaim and observe an International Mother Language Day, on 21 February each year. Its aim is to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. Languages are at the very heart of UNESCO's objectives, as the most powerful instruments of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage. Promotion and dissemination of mother tongues may serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education, but also to develop fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue.

UNESCO Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura stressed on 21 February 2000 that "by deciding to celebrate mother tongues, UNESCO's

Member States wished to recall that languages are not only an essential part of humanity's cultural heritage, but the irreducible expression of human creativity and of its great diversity." The 6000 languages estimated to be spoken in today's world testify to humanity's astounding ability to create tools of communication, to its perception and reflection. They are the mirror of the souls of the societies in which they are born and they reflect the history of their contacts. In this sense, it could be said that all languages are cross-bred." In that broad context, "Favouring the promotion of linguistic diversity and the development of multilingual education from an early age helps preserve cultural diversity and the conditions for international understanding, tolerance and mutual respect."

Taking part in the celebration of the same event, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Languages and former President of Iceland, highlighted the value of languages both as means of communication and as expressions of culture and identity, and qualified them as "humanity's most precious and fragile treasures." (emphasis added)

When the International Mother Language Day was observed on 21 February 2001, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan circulated a message very little known in universities in which it is said *inter alia*: This Day will help to raise awareness

among all peoples of the distinct and enduring value of their languages. In an age of globalization and international cooperation where a few languages have become global languages, it is imperative that we uphold the diversity of local languages. Along with nation and community, language is an essential component of identity and a means by which we find our place in the world. The very essence of belonging in an increasingly rootless world is to hear a language of one's own, to understand and be understood with ease. While differing languages have, in the past, separated peoples and groups, all peoples can unite in celebrating the full diversity of languages.

The United Nations and UNESCO have long worked to promote the dissemination of mother tongues and to advance multilingual education and linguistic diversity. Given the danger that many of the 6,000 languages spoken today may disappear in the next 20 years, it is critical that the international community redouble its efforts to protect this common heritage of mankind. Above all, the lesson of our age is that languages are not mutually exclusive, but that human beings and humanity itself are enriched by communicating in more than one language. Languages no less than the peoples to whom they belong can and must coexist in the new century. International Mother Language Day will contribute to this noble aim.<sup>7</sup>

## II. A PASSIONATE DEBATE

The above message summarized in detail was action-oriented. In 2001 the UN General Assembly had on its official agenda again the item entitled Multilingualism. For reasons of economy of space, we will focus our attention only on the most significant developments relating to multilingualism at the United Nations in particular during the years 2001-2002.

In 2001 the UN General Assembly had before it the most recent report of the Secretary-General on multilingualism (document A/56/656) which

- establishes the framework for the question by distinguishing between official and working languages in various parts of the United Nations system. All are some combination of Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, which are both the official and working languages of the General Assembly and Security Council. All six languages are the official languages of, for example, the Economic and Social Council, while its working languages are English, French and Spanish.

- addresses weaknesses in the pattern of language use in the Organization.

The report notes that efforts to promote multilingualism are considered

from a Secretariat-wide perspective for system-wide effectiveness.

Consultations had identified three sets of issues relating to:

- working languages of the Secretariat,
- the official languages used in documents and meetings,
- public information.

Addressing those issues in detail, the report states that with regard to the Secretariat working languages, the host city's language was often influential when it was also a working language.

Thus English largely prevailed at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Nairobi. French, Spanish or Arabic were widely used at offices in Geneva, Santiago and Beirut, respectively.

To promote multilingualism in vacancy announcements and recruitment, a Galaxy Project is being developed to automate the matching of applicants and needs, including language proficiency requirements. The Project is expected to yield a higher number of French-speaking staff members by the second quarter of 2002. It will also allow greater weight to be given to language skills in recruitment and promotion. Language incentives such as allowances and salary increments are being enforced, while language training is being promoted.

In the area of issues relating to the use of official languages in documents and meetings, the report recalls

- the rule mandating that no language version of a document may be released until all required language versions are available. While the Secretariat makes every effort to adhere to the rule, advance copies are often made available and those are invariably in English.

- The recommended action is for Member States to take a position on the pattern of ad hoc availability of courtesy and advance copies of documents.

- On meetings, the recommendation is for the General Assembly to address the growing trend to hold informal calendar meetings without interpretation.

- In addition, electronic versions of documents are expected to be available in all official languages by January 2002.

A section of the report on issues related to public information details the large number of resources produced to promote global awareness of the United Nations. The broad range of materials produced in all media as well as in official, working and local languages, includes elements/aspects such as :

- A Web site that registers six million "hits" a day. It offers United Nations documents and other information materials. While multilingualism is pursued, resource

limitation and decentralization on the Web site are both limitations. Assistance from the international community has been found for the Spanish and French Web sites.

- Other public information issues in which multilingualism is promoted are related to publications and information materials, United Nations Radio and Television, guided tours, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and the Security Division's efforts to increase the language capacity of its staff.

The report concludes that:

- a more balanced use of working languages in the Secretariat must be ensured;
- attention must be paid to making public information materials available in official languages;
- Member States must attend to the use of official languages in their intergovernmental meetings.

Effective actions to promote multilingualism would require policy guidance from the General Assembly, along with concerted efforts by the United Nations and Member States, as well as adequate resources.<sup>8</sup>

The report of the Secretary-General was considered by the UN general Assembly in December 2001 together with a draft resolution on multilingualism (document A/56/L.44 and later on known as Rev.2+Corr.1).

According to the draft the Assembly was expected to welcome the

appointment of a coordinator for multilingualism.

The Assembly would also recall that the promotion of staff in the Professional and higher categories should take into account adequate and confirmed knowledge of a second official language, and would urge the Secretariat and the executive heads of agencies of the United Nations system to ensure, in particular when promoting staff, respect for equality of the working languages.

By the same token, the Assembly would urge the Secretariat, when recruiting staff, to take into account the knowledge of an official language, in addition to the language of general parlance within the country of the candidates or their mother tongue, whether or not the latter is an official language of the United Nations. It would take note of the overhaul of the recruitment system in the context of Project Galaxy and ask the Secretariat to ensure that the system becomes operational in the second quarter of 2002 and that its potential for furthering multilingualism in the management of vacancy announcements is fully utilized.

According to the text, the Assembly would urge Member States and the Secretariat to plan working meetings so that they are held, except under exceptional circumstances, with interpretation and on the basis of documents translated in good time into



the six official languages. It would request the Secretariat to carry out a comprehensive review of the reasons for the trend of holding calendar meetings of General Assembly committees without interpretation and to propose such improvements as it deems fit.

The Assembly would also request the Secretariat to publish statistical information concerning the acquisition policy of the libraries and documentation centers of the various organs, according to linguistic criteria, and would request the Secretary - General to submit to it at its fifty-eighth session a comprehensive report on the implementation of resolution 50/11 and of the proposed resolution, including, in particular, any necessary statistical information on the development of the use of languages within the Secretariat.<sup>9</sup>

The draft resolution was sponsored by delegations of over 100 Member States from all geographical groups. While introducing the draft, the representative of France, as its main sponsor, said that the diversity of languages was a major asset for mankind. Language was the first asset that was passed on through education, and linguistic diversity was a source of enrichment that must be safeguarded at all costs. France was convinced that consensus must be reached on draft resolution L.44 Rev.1 because language must be a unifying factor.

Adoption of the draft was

eventually postponed until 2002 because consensus could not be attained.

One first problem in reaching consensus was about recruitment in the United Nations system and there were three groups of countries that faced different problems:

- The first group was represented by countries such as Japan, Germany, Thailand and the Republic of Korea, which expressed themselves in languages that were not considered official. The United Nations must appreciate the problems faced by those countries when their young people could not use their mother tongue in the United Nations family.

- The second group was made up of countries such as India, which had countless languages, although English was used.

- The third category would include countries such as Bolivia, whose mother tongue was Spanish. That group also included Latin American and countries of the French-speaking world.

- Another problem with the draft resolution had to do with post-recruitment promotions. The only criteria governing promotion were competence, proficiency, professional skills and equitable geographic distribution. To work within the spirit of the United Nations Charter, staff

members should be willing to learn another language in addition to the one they spoke when recruited.

- There were a number of issues of growing concern to many delegations: the issue of interpretation in various meetings, the time factor in translating documents. The Secretariat should be better organized so that those services were implemented more efficiently

The draft resolution on multilingualism introduced by France provoked a passionate debate in the plenary of the United Nations on 21 December 2001. A good analysis of the problems raised by the draft is contained in the statement made by Ambassador Patrick F. Kennedy, United States Representative for UN Management and Reform, on December 21, 2001. Because of their obvious relevance for this paper, the main ideas developed by Ambassador Kennedy are reproduced in a nearly verbatim form:

As a multicultural country, the United States fully supports and appreciates multilingualism. Residents of the borough of Queens, in New York City, claim the greatest level of ethnic diversity of any county in the United States. Residents of Queens represent over 120 countries and speak more than 100 languages. In fact, New York City's foreign-born residents account for more than 35% of the City's population. As Mayor Giuliani said on October 1, 2001: "Americans are not a

single ethnic group. Americans are not one race or one religion. Americans emerge from all your nations." While fully respecting the principle of multilingualism, the American delegation must voice its strong concern regarding several of the provisions in draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.1. For example, it urges the Secretary-General "to ensure, in particular when promoting staff, respect for the equality of the working languages of the Secretariat and of their use." How would the Secretary-General "ensure" respect for the equality of French and English in the Secretariat "and of their use"? Does this language infer the application of a quota system? Would such provisions be implemented at the expense of competing staff members whose mother tongue is not French or English and override other considerations, including competency and experience? There is no legislative provision that specifies that working languages must be used equally. The principle of the equality of the working languages and, in fact, of all languages, be they official or non-official, is not in dispute and, hopefully, is accepted by all delegations. The question involves the utilization of the working languages in the everyday work of the Secretariat. Use is simply based on practical considerations including, as stated in the Secretary-General's report under this item, the language of the host country.

The United States cannot support a paragraph whose strict application

would have the effect of penalizing applicants for UN positions whose “mother tongue” is not one of the six official languages. In effect, its strict application would require such applicants to be trilingual to speak not only their “first-language” but also English or French plus another official language. Many prospective UN staff members who do not speak one of the official languages as their “first-language” are from developing countries whose nationals are under-represented in the Secretariat. Such a paragraph clearly detracts from the universal and multicultural character of the Organization. Ambassador Kennedy urged all delegations not to support such discriminatory language. The hallmark of the United Nations should be inclusivity not discrimination. In his opinion, many provisions in the draft go beyond current human resources legislation. The full implications of such specific personnel issues should be considered with care and deliberation in the Financial Committee following full and constructive consultations with the co-sponsors.

American delegation also could not support a paragraph whose implementation would have the effect of hindering the negotiating process, not only in the General Assembly and its committees but also in the Security Council and its sub-bodies. Implementation of provisions urging Member States to plan “working meetings” to allow them to be held,

except under exceptional circumstances, on the basis of “documents” which have been translated in good time, would place undue burdens on the Secretariat and Member States and have a profound negative impact on the decision-making process. As stated in the Secretary-General’s report, “There are no provisions requiring the Secretariat to provide translations in all the official languages of preliminary texts of draft resolutions.” Delegations must often conduct negotiations under severe time constraints, including on questions of peace and security and humanitarian relief. Such important work should not and cannot be hindered by implementation of this paragraph. It was also noted that there has been no estimate of expenditures.

Explanations were requested about the meaning of “to publish statistical information on the acquisition policies of the libraries and documentation centres of the various organs, according to linguistic criteria”. Do the sponsors mean “to publish statistics on the number of books and electronic resources acquired by the libraries and documentation centres of the various organs in the six official languages”? Acquisition decisions cannot be based solely on linguistic criteria. One cannot divide a budget into six equal parts and make acquisition decisions accordingly. Not all books and databases are available in the six languages. Acquisition policies must be based on a number of factors including relevancy,

professional reputation of the author or editor, language availability, and projected usage of the materials.

It was considered inappropriate for a draft resolution being discussed directly in Plenary to contain the specific language calling for development of a minor research tool. Such language should be considered in the Committee on Information and the Fourth Committee. All delegations and capitals have access to the Official Documents System (ODS). The ODS contains the full texts, in the six official languages, of all parliamentary documents. In the first quarter of next year, all users of the ODS will be able to search for documents in the system using words in the official language of their choice. With full multilingual support, there is very little need for a multilingual glossary.

Another question was what the sponsors mean by “any statistical information on the development of the use of languages in the Secretariat”. Considering the fact that French and English are the working languages of the Secretariat, it was considered unclear which languages are being referred to. Do the sponsors mean the number of participants in the language courses offered by the Secretariat or the number of reports and working papers drafted in French or English? If the sponsors are referring to the use of the official languages of the General Assembly or Security Council in the Secretariat, they are blurring the

differences between the working languages of the Secretariat and the official and working languages of those and other organs.

According to an authoritative reference work - *Ethnologue* Volume 1, *Languages of the World*, 14<sup>th</sup> edition published in 2000, the six official languages are spoken by 35% of “first language” speakers worldwide. Application of multilingualism in the UN context does not equate with universality or cultural diversity. As representatives of a culturally diverse society, the American delegation cherishes multilingualism, but its application in this context must be considered in light of questions of practicality and necessity, limited resources, fairness to all delegations, and other priorities as decided by all Member States.<sup>10</sup>

The US delegation was not the only one to express many critical remarks about the draft resolution. Several other representatives did the same. Their ideas are reproduced below on the basis of the summaries provided by DPI's staff.<sup>11</sup>

The representative of India said multilingualism was a challenge everybody in his country grew up with. He understood the virtues and the uses of multilingualism, but also knew that it could be used to sidestep a dialogue. At the United Nations, language was politics. Human beings spoke languages, not States, but it was the

interplay of State politics that had determined the official languages of the United Nations. More people spoke Hindi than French or some other official languages, but Hindi was not an official language of the Organization.

The United Nations could not have a vast number of official languages, but what it should not do was confuse multilingualism with the promotion only of the six languages it had dubbed official. Class distinctions had crept in among them; one had become more equal than others. The draft proposed changes in administrative policy that should not be smuggled in through a resolution on multilingualism. In his opinion nationals of the major donor countries dominated the Secretariat because most of the posts were allocated on the basis of contributions. The two working languages of the Secretariat were European languages. It was, therefore, not surprising that most developing countries felt that the Secretariat promoted a Western agenda. What the Secretariat promoted as universal norms were usually the latest Western fads.

The representative of Japan stated he had serious concerns that the draft would have an adverse impact on nationals whose mother tongue was not one of the official languages. That was of particular concern to nationals of developing countries. There could be no justification for discrimination by the United Nations against such nationals. Placing them at a disadvantage on the

basis of their mother tongue was equally unjustified. He was also concerned that the draft would result in recruitment discrimination against nationals who had no other mother tongue than one of the six official languages. The draft would still have a greater negative impact on the United Nations system than resolution 50/11 of 1995, because it expanded the scope of application to include the funds and programmes of the United Nations. He wondered whether the draft would serve the purpose of multilingualism. It could, despite the intention of the proposer, inadvertently work against that goal.

The representative of Papua New Guinea made a very long and analytical statement and said a draft resolution on multilingualism and geographical distribution within the United Nations system should not attempt to amend Article 101 of the Charter, which states explicitly that the paramount consideration for employment of staff should be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity. That Article also provided that due regard should be given to recruit staff on as wide a geographical base as possible. Since it was clear the geographical distribution criterion had not worked in favour of small countries, why should they now be required to overcome an additional impediment for employment or promotion within the system? A resolution that ran counter to Article 101 -- which further called for

fundamental freedoms for all without distinction to language, as well as race, sex or religion—should not be entertained. Such a draft would presume that without working knowledge of a second official language of the United Nations, there was no need to apply for a position within the Organization, regardless of the applicant's efficiency, competence and integrity. Such a notion would also preclude the promotion of individuals already working within the system, and generally amounted to discrimination against anyone lacking knowledge of a second official language of the Organization.

He went on to say that, as a country desperately trying to preserve some 800 traditional languages, Papua New Guinea believed that a resolution on multilingualism should promote and preserve languages, in line with the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights. Article V of the Declaration emphasized the equality and independence of rights for all language communities, and terms such as “regional or minority languages” did not appear in that text because such modifiers were “frequently used to restrict the rights of language communities”. Again, a draft resolution on the matter should not effectively legislate the subjugation of an individual's right to freedom of employment because of his or her language. The Assembly must not legitimize the restriction of rights and freedoms based on language choice.

Given Papua New Guinea's geographical location, for 99 per cent of the population English or another European language—which had practically no relevance in the everyday lives of people in the region—would be the third or fourth language of choice. Given a choice, the people would prefer Bahasa Indonesia, spoken by the country's close neighbour, or Japanese, a major trading partner. Given the choice of a European language, for trade reasons his country might prefer German. In any event, none of those languages was listed as one of the Organization's official languages. He added that the Organization must be served by the best technical and professional expertise Member States had to offer, and such candidates must not be denied opportunities for employment or promotion based on ability to master a new language.

According to the representative of Spain, the six official working languages of the United Nations did not constitute a discriminatory regime but a pragmatic one. It would have been impossible for the Charter to endorse all the languages of the world, the official languages of the Organization continued to be those spoken by the majority of the people in the world. Diversity, universality and multilingualism were part of the foundation of the United Nations and a testament to its global spirit.(emphasis added) Therefore, it was not possible to consider the official languages as discriminatory or restrictive. Indeed, the

use of only one language would be more discriminatory. He was concerned, therefore, with the growing twenty-first century trend of using only one working language in the United Nations. This was particularly disturbing in light of the fact that use of languages such as Spanish - which estimates showed would be spoken by nearly 550 million people by 2050 - was steadily increasing. A glaring example of the current trend of single-language usage was the United Nations public information Web site, which displayed an overwhelming amount - some 80 per cent—of content in English. Yet, only one tenth of the world's population spoke that language. The Organization should do more to ensure that information was distributed in a fair manner, portraying the diversity of the nations it represented. Multilingualism could not exist if the United Nations officials were monolingual, he continued. An organization of global scope must connect with all people and all civil societies. To that end, Spain appreciated the steps taken by the Secretary-General to increase and encourage learning and teaching of languages among United Nations officials. At the same time, he expressed concern that there was no legal requirement for United Nations personnel to speak at least one of the official languages along with one working language. Indeed, that had been the wish of the fiftieth session of the Assembly. The time had come to make that criterion a reality. Spain believed that people did not have to

learn an exclusive language used by the United Nations or any other institution - on the contrary, the institutions should learn the languages of the peoples of the world.

From an Asian perspective, the representative of Singapore had serious reservations about the draft and would have voted against it if it were presented for action. She was concerned that the resolution would inadvertently promote discrimination among Member States. It was obvious that United Nations personnel would speak at least one of the working languages. But many Member States did not have any of the six languages as national languages. The negative implications for employees from such States were obvious. If the draft were adopted, citizens of such countries would suffer an additional handicap in their careers in the United Nations, unless their countries found the resources to train them in two official languages.

Reflecting the attitude of Arab countries, the representative of Egypt said that introduction of the Arab language as an official United Nations language in 1964 was a landmark achievement, which drew the attention of the Arab community to the various events of the United Nations system. But multilingualism concerned all official languages, which should be treated on an equal footing. That meant the translation of documents for meetings and conferences or interpretation for meetings of United

Nations bodies. He looked forward to the day when the General Assembly would decide to achieve language equity on its Web site. Egypt felt that respect for multilingualism was in keeping with the basic principles of the United Nations, and would bring about fruitful cooperation among Member States. The General Assembly should reiterate the principle of equality for all official languages.

In a similar spirit, the representative of Kuwait said that tolerance and respect made it imperative that all languages be considered important. All had their beauty and were worthy of admiration. Multilingualism was one of the most important issues under consideration by the General Assembly, and was complemented by agenda items on the Dialogue among Civilizations, Multiculturalism and Cultural Heritage. He attached special importance to use of the Arabic language as one of the official languages at the United Nations. He stressed the need for support of Arabic interpretation and translation services in the Secretariat. The meetings of some regional groups were held without Arabic interpretation, which went against General Assembly resolution 50/11 and deprived Arab States of an important service. He hoped all countries would abide by General Assembly resolutions and refuse to hold meetings if interpretation was not available in all official languages. Yet, he noted positive developments in the field of language

training. The Secretariat must continue to work in that area, particularly for the Arabic language. He encouraged the Secretariat to ensure that material provided on the Internet appeared in all official languages. The Arab department of the International School suffered from a severe lack of resources, while other languages enjoyed sponsorship from other nations. Teaching children their language was a right that could not be denied. It was a pillar of their cultural identity. (emphasis added)

For the representative of Russian Federation the existence of official and working languages reflected the universal nature of the Organization, and the use of several languages enriched the Organization itself. Member States had confirmed the need to guarantee equality between the official languages. There was nowadays a harmonious integration of new States in the practical activities of the Organization. The principle of equality between official and working languages had to be regularly confirmed by the Assembly. All Member States should be accorded equality. That, however, had not been achieved fully.

As a French speaking diplomat, the representative of Gabon believed it was indeed a pity that, despite countless resolutions on the issue, the use of the six official languages at the United Nations had only now become a virtual reality. Often, the use of those languages came only at the last stage of



considering an issue, such as in publishing texts. Due to lack of time, those texts failed to reflect the high calibre of the exchange of views that had taken place. Year after year, they lost in theoretical richness and in depth. That low quality was a loss for the Organization, impoverishing its assets, as far as international cooperation was concerned. Languages were vehicles for expressing thoughts, sources of enrichment and tools for education.

The representative of Philippines reaffirmed his country's commitment to all six official languages of the United Nations. Some paragraphs in draft resolution L.44/Rev.1 supported the equality of those languages, including those for interpretation and documentation needs. However, he was concerned about operative paragraph on personnel in the United Nations which suggested that knowledge of two official languages was on a par with competence and experience in a particular field. It also extended the second language requirement to other parts of the United Nations systems, including funds and programmes. Recruitment should be based on competence and education. Many staff members had a mother tongue other than the six official languages. Requiring them to have two official languages would affect promotion and place those who had not learned a second language at a clear disadvantage. It would hinder other goals, such as gender balance.

In the same context, the representative of Pakistan appreciated that General Assembly resolutions should promote multilingualism and not discrimination on the basis of language. Many developing countries spent precious resources training their diplomats in one of the official languages and would face difficulties if requirements for a second were imposed. Multilingualism should promote cooperation, not conflict. Language could become a source of conflict.<sup>12</sup>

The representative of the Republic of Korea appreciated that the promotion of multilingualism should be based on respect for cultural diversity and indigenous languages,. Multilingualism could be a tool for harmony among people, and should be in no way a reason for pitting one group against another. He did not believe that the draft would promote multilingualism in the genuine sense of the word. It was more about promoting a second official language. Advancement of United Nations staff should be handled in accordance with Article 101 of the Charter. He believed the draft went against the letter and spirit of that Article. The concept of knowledge of a second language as a criterion for recruitment and promotion was biased against nationals who did not speak one of the official languages as their mother tongue.

Finally, the last speaker, the representative of Malaysia was not

opposed to promotion of multilingualism in the United Nations. His delegation had abstained from voting on resolution 50/11 along with many other countries. A number of countries had voted against it. The thrust of some operative paragraphs of the draft went beyond resolution 50/11, and penalized countries whose mother tongue was not one of the official languages. Recruitment and promotion should be based on Article 101 of the Charter. Diversity was one of the characteristics of the Organization. It was regrettable that the sponsors had failed to take delegations objections into account during the Year of Dialogue between Civilizations. He was glad that more time was allowed to achieve a consensus text.

### **III. A CONSENSUS RESOLUTION**

That additional time proved to be really necessary and useful. Further consultations took place in January and February 2002. Introducing on 15 February 2002 the revised draft, France's representative said the text before the Assembly was the product of a real consensus and united all around a shared purpose, to ensure that multilingualism lived.(emphasis added)

Japan's representative, speaking in explanation of vote before adoption of the text, said the draft contained no language that was disadvantageous to nationals whose mother tongue was not

an official language of the United Nations. It also paid due regard to the principle of equitable geographical distribution. Multilingualism was to be pursued to promote and protect diversity of languages and cultures.

The text of draft resolution A/RES/56.262 was initially co-sponsored by Afghanistan, Albania, Andorra, Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Benin, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, China, Colombia, Comoros, Congo, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, France, Gabon, and Georgia. Additional co-sponsors of the text were Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Latvia, Lebanon, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Monaco, Morocco, Nicaragua, Niger, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, San Marino, Senegal, Seychelles, Slovakia, Slovenia, Somalia, Spain, Sudan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Togo, Tunisia, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Viet Nam and Yugoslavia.

As a result of successful consultations, recognizing that genuine multilingualism promotes unity in diversity and international understanding, the General Assembly adopted without a vote on 15 February 2002 resolution A/RES/56/262 entitled Multilingualism by which it encouraged United Nations staff members to actively continue using existing training facilities to acquire and enhance their proficiency in one or more official languages of the Organization. By the terms of Part I of the text, the Assembly stressed that employment of staff shall continue to be carried out in strict accordance with Article 101 of the Charter and in line with the relevant provisions of the Assembly.

[According to Article 101, the Secretary-General shall appoint staff under the regulations established by the Assembly. The paramount consideration in the employment of staff and in the determination of conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity. Due regard shall also be paid to the importance of recruiting staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible.]

By other terms of the final version of the text, the Assembly stressed that the promotion of staff in the Professional and higher categories should be carried out in strict accordance with Article 101 and in line with the provisions of its resolution

2480 B (XXIII) and the relevant provisions of its resolution 55/258 on Human Resources Management.

[In resolution 2480 B (XXIII) the Assembly asked the Secretary-General to take steps to ensure that from 1 January 1970, the acceptable minimum requirement at the moment of recruitment would be the ability to use one of the working languages of the Secretariat. It also stated that from 1 January 1972, all promotions from one grade to another, from P-1 to D-2 inclusive, for staff subject to geographical distribution, would be conditional upon adequate and confirmed knowledge of a second working language.

In resolution 55/258 the Assembly asked the Secretary-General to develop further criteria for mobility to maximize its benefits for the Organization and to ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all staff. The International Civil Service Commission was also asked to conduct a comprehensive review of the question of mobility and its implications for career development of United Nations staff members.]

By the terms of Part II of A/RES/56/262, the Assembly welcomed the decision by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 17 November 1999, that 21 February be proclaimed “International Mother Language Day”. It called on Member

States and the Secretariat to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by the world's people.

Yemen's representative (speaking on behalf of the Arab Group) said in explanation of his position after adoption of the text that the draft should have stressed that interpretation should be available at all meetings, including regional ones, and that documentation should be provided in all six languages. The latter was often neglected. He also reiterated the importance of the Assembly implementing all resolutions without selectivity.

#### **IV. TOWARDS A WORLD BASED ON MULTILINGUALISM**

UN resolution A/RES/56/262 of 15 February 2002 is the most recent consensus text on multilingualism having an undeniable political and pragmatic value. However, it is just the expression of a particular stage in the framework of collective diplomatic efforts to promote multilingualism. Those efforts, which are continuing, are little known. The General Conference of UNESCO recognized in 1999 in more explicit terms the need to improve understanding and communication among peoples, as well as the great importance of safeguarding the linguistic and cultural heritage of humanity and extending the influence of each of the cultures and languages of which that heritage is composed.

In UNESCO's vision the current threat to linguistic diversity posed by the globalization of communication and the tendency to use a single language, at the risk of marginalizing the other major languages of the world, or even of causing the lesser-used languages, including regional languages, to disappear is a dramatic reality. Therefore, UNESCO believes that educating young people throughout the world involves sensitizing them to dialogue between cultures, which engenders tolerance and mutual respect.

However, if substantial progress has been made in the last few decades by the language sciences, still insufficient attention has been paid to the extraordinary ability of children to reproduce sounds at key periods of their development. The ability of children to acquire phonetic and grammatical skills has been scientifically corroborated; these skills enable young children to acquire competence at an early age in real communication, both passive and active, in at least two languages, whichever they may be.

UNESCO is aware that democratic access to knowledge depends on a command of several languages and that provision of such access for all is a duty at a time when private language training, which is both expensive and elitist, is spreading in many countries. Therefore, UNESCO recommended that Member States:

(a) create the conditions for a social, intellectual and media

environment of an international character which is conducive to linguistic pluralism;

(b)promote, through multilingual education, democratic access to knowledge for all citizens, whatever their mother tongue, and build linguistic pluralism; strategies to achieve these goals could include:

1. the early acquisition (in kindergartens and nursery schools) of a second language in addition to the mother tongue, offering alternatives;

2. further education in this second language at primary-school level based on its use as a medium of instruction, thus using two languages for the acquisition of knowledge throughout the school course up to university level;

3. intensive and transdisciplinary learning of at least a third modern language in secondary school, so that when pupils leave school they have a working knowledge of three languages - which should represent the normal range of practical linguistic skills in the twenty-first century;

4. an assessment of secondary-school leaving certificates with a view to promoting a grasp of modern languages from the point of view of communication and understanding;

5. international exchanges of primary - and secondary-school teachers, offering them a legal framework for teaching their subjects in schools in other countries, using their own languages and thus enabling their pupils to acquire both knowledge and linguistic skills;

6. due attention in education, vocational training and industry to the potential represented by regional languages, minority languages, where they exist, and migrants' languages of origin;

7. availability to teachers and education authorities of a computerized network, including a database, to facilitate exchanges of information and experience;

8. the establishment of a national and/or regional committee to study and make proposals on linguistic pluralism in order to initiate the necessary dialogue between the representatives of all professions and all disciplines so that they can identify the main lines of a language education system which is adapted to each country but which also facilitates international communication, while preserving the rich and inalienable linguistic and cultural heritage of humanity;

(c)encourage the study of the languages of the major ancient and modern civilizations, with a view to safeguarding and promoting a literary education;

UNESCO General Conference also adopted in 1999 a recommendation on the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace. The document emphasizes inter alia:

- the importance of multilingualism for the promotion of universal access to information, particularly to information in the public

domain;

- the importance of multilingualism for the promotion of multiculturalism on global information networks,

- that UNESCO should play a leading international role in promoting access to information in the public domain, especially by encouraging multilingualism and cultural diversity on global information networks;

- that Member States, non-governmental organizations, the world intellectual community and the scientific institutions concerned should support and participate actively in the development of multilingualism and cultural diversity on the global information networks by facilitating free and universal access to information in the public domain;

- The Director-General should undertake the following concrete actions to promote multilingualism and cultural diversity on global information networks:

(a) to strengthen activities to make cultural heritage in the public domain which is preserved in museums, libraries and archives freely accessible on the global information networks;

(b) to support the formulation of national and international policies and principles encouraging all Member States to promote the development and use of translation tools and terminology for better interoperability;

(c) to encourage the provision of resources for linguistic pluralism through global networks, in particular

by reinforcing the UNESCO international observatory on the information society;

(d) to pursue further consultations with Member States and competent international governmental and non-governmental organizations for closer cooperation on language rights, respect for linguistic diversity and the expansion of multilingual electronic resources on the global information networks.

## **V. UNIVERSITIES AND INITIATIVE B@bel**

Can all these recommendations be implemented ? The answer is not easy. UNESCO, being mandated by its Constitution to “free exchange of ideas and knowledge”, endeavours to reaffirm the concept of universal access to information in the emerging information society. In addition, UNESCO’s Constitution clearly spells out this mission in Article I(2c): the Organization will “maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge, by initiating methods of international cooperation calculated to give the people of all countries access to the printed and published materials produced by any of them”.

The promotion of access to information in the public domain in a balanced use of languages was approved by the General Conference. The Director-General was invited to

“lend fresh impetus to linguistic diversity at all levels of education and to multilingualism in educational curricula and to assist in the further development of educational services in Member States in indigenous and minority languages”.

Hence, UNESCO’s approach is to protect the interest of the majority by promoting the universal multilingual diffusion of the global public domain of knowledge and the global information commons through networks such as the Internet. This strategic approach respects the spirit of the Constitution and the General Conference resolutions and it also confirms that UNESCO must take a leading initiative in it.

Public domain information is a global public good; without active public support there will be under-provision of this good. With this in mind, UNESCO’s main goal consists in redefining universal access to information in all languages in cyberspace by encouraging

1. the development of tools (translation mechanisms; terminology; protocols; etc.) that will facilitate multilingual communication in cyberspace
2. the promotion of fair allocation of public resources to public information providers;
3. the promotion of access to multilingual public domain information and knowledge.

This programme known as “Initiative B@bel” proposes to do this by implementing concrete activities at national and international levels, with the objective to develop multilingualism on the information networks and to encourage full partnership between governments, industry and civil society. The programme could be oriented in several directions:

- creation of the infrastructure: establishment of UNESCO Chairs, associating universities with industry, for strengthening research in and development of multilingual search engines, multilingual gateways, virtual libraries and archives, etc.;
- development of multilingual tools: adapting multilingual indexing of websites, thesauri, standards, lexicons and terminology existing in the European Union, UNESCO, ISO, UNU, Union Latine, Infoterm, etc., to other languages including local ones;
- Strengthen interoperability: supporting the development of automatic translation tools, including the production of translation free software, the application of translation schools work to the webpages, the on-line development of multilingual encyclopedia, upgrading of routers, etc.; formulation of national and international policies and regulations: encouraging the use of many languages on the information networks, the on-line teaching of foreign languages in the education systems, the development of

multilingual websites (with a web prize), etc.

- In order to develop a common vision of the information society, the United Nations system, under ITU's leadership, is organizing the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that will take place in December 2003 in Geneva (Switzerland) and in 2005 in Tunis (Tunisia). The results of the WSIS will be reflected in a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action. UNESCO with its original mandate to promote the free exchange of ideas and knowledge will have a key role in the preparation of the WSIS.

The Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace to be adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 2003 will be an additional key intellectual and conceptual contribution of this specialized agency to the international response to the challenges of the information society.

UNESCO is preparing its contribution to the WSIS through a series of thematic consultations and regional conferences which will also serve as platforms for the Organizations' partners, mainly the professional communities and representatives of civil society, to debate on the information society and for the preparation of their input to the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action of the WSIS.<sup>14</sup>

This approach and projects can be implemented successfully only with a strong political consensus and cooperation from the Member States and from all universities which can be instrumental in this respect.

In AUAP's view one of the major hindrances in establishing some common standards and in facilitating students and faculty exchanges as well as the transfer of credits, is the diversity of languages. For pragmatic reasons, there is no other choice than to exercise the English language as a second language, as it is a universal language for understanding global communication, recognition and appreciation of academic norms, standards and credit transfer. Thus, there is a need to improve the communication skills and proficiency in the English language among the university administrators, faculty members and students in the region. By learning and sharing through networking, universities can collaborate in the promotion of a converging spirit, in directing their resources and potentials towards academic excellence which can not be separated from multilingualism. In this respect, universities from all geographical areas may contribute to further developing practical guidelines for putting into effect the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights which states in article 23 that :

1. Education must help to foster the capacity for linguistic and cultural



self-expression of the language community of the territory where it is provided.

2. Education must help to maintain and develop the language spoken by the language community of the territory where it is provided.

3. Education must always be at the service of linguistic and cultural diversity and of harmonious relations between different language communities throughout the world.

4. Within the context of the foregoing principles, everyone has the right **to learn any language**. (emphasis added)

AUAP is a good example of an academic grouping that helps building an active network of communications, exchange, sharing of information and expertise. By its general activities AUAP assists universities of its area to discharge more effectively their responsibility to provide higher education and training, to extend the frontiers of knowledge and contribute actively to the well-being of the community, to develop human resources, to preserve and enhance the cultural heritage and thus to serve the cause of socio- economic development and peace. All these objectives may be productively served by enlightened multilingualism. In this respect, David Crystal, one of the leading experts on language, wrote: “I believe in the fundamental value of multilingualism, as an amazing world resource which presents us with different perspectives and insights, and thus enables us to

reach a more profound understanding of the nature of the human mind and spirit”.<sup>15</sup>

In this noble endeavour enlarging cooperation between universities at the international, regional, sub-regional and national levels, as well as an increased interaction with intergovernmental, governmental and private bodies dealing with higher education in a multilingual environment become an imperative task. The continuing consideration of multilingualism in diplomatic fora will offer a significant demonstration of the cogency and topicality of that task, as well as of its obvious practical value. There should be no doubt that linguistic diversity in the global information networks and universal use of cyberspace are at the core of contemporary debates and can be determinant to the development of a knowledge-based society.<sup>16</sup>

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## References

1. Cf. Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. New Revised Edition, Gramercy Books, New York, 1994, p.940, col.1. Cf. also Rod Ellis, The Study of Second Language Acquisition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, pp.10 and 715. Some relevant aspects of multilingualism are well described by D. Chitoran Professor of English Linguistics, University of Bucharest (Romania), Consultant on Higher Education, UNESCO, in his paper entitled "Language Issues in the World Today. The Role of UNESCO and of the Universities" at a Conference organized on 9-12 December 1999 by the Greek Applied Linguistics Association with the theme The Contribution of Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages to the Promotion of a Peace Culture. The printed text is available in Proceedings, Greek Applied Linguistic Association, vol. VII< 2001, pp.47-59.
2. See Doc.GA/9049/Part I. 29 February 1996, pp.16-18.
3. The quotation was taken from the article The New Latin: English Dominates in Academe published on September 8, 2000 in the Internet edition of The Chronicle of Higher Education visited on 25 March 2002 at <http://chronicle.com/free/v47/i02/02a07301.htm>
4. The Barcelona Declaration may be consulted on the Internet via [www.ilor.com](http://www.ilor.com) The full text is available at <http://www.egt.ie/udhr/udlr-en.html>
5. Cf. Federico Mayor, The World Ahead. Our Future in the Making. UNESCO, Paris, 1999.
6. See Press Release SG/SM/6395, 21 November 1997.
7. The message is available at [www.un.org/news/Press/docs](http://www.un.org/news/Press/docs)
8. The Secretary-General's report on Multilingualism can be consulted in extenso at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)
9. The full text of the draft resolution is not available on the Internet. Its summary was done by DPI and can be consulted at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)
10. The statement is available in extenso on the web-site of the US State Department.
11. All references and quotations are extracted from the summarized speeches delivered in the plenary of

- the UN General Assembly on 21 December 2001 as consulted at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org) We reproduce as closely as possible the original terminology used by various speakers.
12. Professor D. Chitoran rightly pointed out that “Although language by itself is not and cannot be a source of conflict, there is a linguistic dimension at the root of many conflicts in the world today. Language can be used for good purposes and abused for deplorable ones.[...] Linguists should make it a more direct concern of their endeavours, to reveal how language can and has been used as a powerful tool in creating and maintaining misunderstanding, mistrust, enmity and hatred among peoples.[...] One of the imperatives for all those engaged in the linguistic professions today is to “disarm” language, which should go hand in hand with disarming history.” See communication mentioned in note 1 above.
13. UNESCO’s resolutions and recommendations were consulted at [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)
14. For details concerning UNESCO’s future involvement in promoting multilingualism see the working documents available at [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)
15. David Crystal, English as a global language, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997,p.VIII.
16. See UNESCO document officially entitled DRAFT R E C O M M E N D A T I O N CONCERNING THE PROMOTION AND USE OF MULTILINGUALISM AND UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO CYBERSPACE. This document is available at [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org) and includes the amendments proposed by the international group of experts during its second meeting from 25-27 March 2002 to document 31 C/25 Corr. of the UNESCO General Conference at its 31<sup>st</sup> session in 2001.The final approval of the recommendation is expected in 2003.