

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the celebration
of International Mother Language Day

UNESCO Headquarters, 21 February 2000

Madam Chairperson,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It is with great emotion that I address you today on the occasion of the celebration of the first International Mother Language Day.

The mother language, which cradles each human being from its earliest attempts to speak, is a prism which shapes our initial ideas about the world and maps out the contours of our identity. From this personal identity, rooted in our own cultural lineage, we draw our capacity to free ourselves, to launch ourselves in the world and there to pursue our destiny.

The Member States of UNESCO determined to honour mother languages in order to remind us that they are not only an essential part of humanity's cultural heritage but also the irreducible expression of human creativity in all its diversity. Nearly 6,000 spoken languages have been identified worldwide, demonstrating the amazing capacity of human beings to create the tools of communication, perception and thought. Languages mirror the soul of the society in which they have their origin but they also reflect the history of their contacts. Thus it might be said that all languages are hybrids.

Encouraging the promotion of linguistic diversity and the development of multilingual education from early childhood is a way of ensuring the preservation of cultural pluralism and the conditions for international understanding, tolerance and mutual respect. In fact, learning about other people's cultures and how to listen to others reminds me of an English saying that I often like to quote: "No man is an island".

Allow me to speak about my personal experience. Japanese is my mother language. I developed my perception of the world through the concepts of that language, which is both ordinary and marvellous - marvellous, quite simply because it is my own and because it enriched my childhood. I was drawn to literature at a very early age. After revelling in Japanese literature I turned to other authors - French, Russian, English, German - and measured, not without a certain feeling of intoxication, the vastness and diversity of human cultures.

Very shortly afterwards I found myself in a position in which I was required to communicate with speakers of other languages. At the age of 21, I joined my country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In following my diplomatic career I have lived on three continents and travelled throughout the world. I have thus had the good fortune to come in contact with a large number of languages and cultures.

Today I realize that I have actually spent more years of my life away from my own country, in places where not only is my mother language not spoken but where people have no idea of the world view embodied by that language. Thinking about what this multilingual experience has brought me, I would say that it has enabled me not only to communicate with

other human beings and to work with them, but above all to get to know other people's conceptions of the world, to understand reality through other prisms and to grasp more fully the multiplicity and universality of human culture. In short, multilingualism has helped me to be a more rounded human being.

“When an old man dies, a library burns down”. This celebrated saying by Amadou Hampâté Bâ could be adapted to mother tongues: when a language dies, part of humanity dies. As the international community celebrates the International Year for the Culture of Peace, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly, International Mother Language Day is making its contribution to world peace.

I should like to thank His Excellency Ambassador Ali for this initiative. The very short time available for the preparation of this Day did not perhaps allow as many Member States as we might have wished to participate actively in the celebration. It is true that we need to clarify the aims and scope of this international day and the ways and means to be employed, and I will be requesting the Advisory Committee for Linguistic Pluralism and Multilingual Education to submit to me its recommendations in that regard. With the support of Her Excellency Ms Finnbogadottir, Goodwill Ambassador for Languages, and Mr Marti, the Chairperson of the Advisory Committee for Linguistic Pluralism and Multilingual Education, I have no doubt that this Day will contribute to the promotion, appreciation and development not only of mother languages in our Member States but also of multilingual education, which will enable all of us to become genuine world citizens while preserving our original cultural affinities.

Your Excellencies, Dear Colleagues,

I can hardly close without a few words in my mother language: “*Bokokugo-kokusaibi no kaikai wo sengen shimasu*”, which is to say “I declare open the International Mother Language Day”.