



## **Towards Peace, Dignity And Enrichment: Language Policies In The 21st Century**

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Mr. Chairman, Your Honour Mr. Mayor, Your Excellency Mr. President, Your Excellency Mr. Minister, Distinguished Guests and Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both a professional and personal pleasure for me to have the honour to address you this morning. For several years I have respected the far-sighted and effective work of the UNESCO Centre de Catalunya, through which I have come to know the Linguapax Institute. In various endeavours, I have also worked constructively with some of your friends and colleagues.

It is with utmost sincerity that I congratulate the organisers and sponsors of this Congress. This is a timely event. In our ever smaller and yet more complex world, the challenge is surely upon us to find ways of living together which are peaceful, respectful and facilitative of human development. We can not afford a clash of civilizations. Nor can we afford to think in such terms.

The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, who regrets he cannot be here today, believes that peace and prosperity depend very much on how we think. We are confident that peace and prosperity can be achieved if we think and act in inclusive and democratic terms, proceeding on the basis of respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. This implies that we hold high at least three values: social peace, human dignity, and the enrichment of civilization. I believe these are universally shared values, even if they are not always upheld in the practice of States.

Permit me briefly to relate these values to our topic of language policies. To begin, it must be recognized that no social order is neutral from the perspective of language policy. In this sense, a State or other responsible authority has a language policy whether or not it expresses it in legislative terms. This is because social organisation (and, therefore, peace and justice) depends on language both as a medium of communication for exchange of ideas and as a basis for the construction of ideas. Communication is vital for the peaceful management of intersecting and often competing interests, needs and aspirations, while ideas are evidently the basis of civilizational progress in terms of social, economic and cultural development. However, since humans speak different languages, the choice of language in public affairs - whether de jure or de facto - necessarily serves to advantage some and disadvantage others. Sometimes expressed in terms of a designated State or official language, it is typically the majority language which is chosen for public affairs. As a consequence, all speakers of other languages,



so-called minority languages, are thereby disadvantaged at least to some degree. This is because non-mother-tongue speakers must confront the obstacle of a foreign language in accessing public goods, while mother-tongue speakers of the chosen language face no such hurdle.

Unfortunately, all too often, the choice of language for official purposes is expressed in exclusive terms, that is as the effective prohibition of the use of other languages. This means those who are already disadvantaged are made further so. To the extent language proficiency becomes a mediator of access to public goods including opportunities, ranging from access to justice, various services and employment to social honours and prestige, so language serves the interests of some and diminishes others. Thus language divides - rendering some 'insiders' and others 'outsiders'. This is the basic stuff of conflict, and as the stakes rise so does the potential even for violence. Indeed, Mr. President, I need not tell anyone in this part of the world that history has demonstrated some extreme forms of such exclusion causing tremendous social and cultural harm. Moreover, history also shows that those severely disadvantaged and/or excluded will not remain passive forever; sometimes they will pursue their politics through other means.

So, I believe that the value of social peace demands that we reconcile possibly conflicting linguistic interests, needs and aspirations. But, this value does not stand alone. There is an at least equally important value to be found in respect for human dignity. Language is in the nature of the human species, and it is not only an important instrument for communication but also the carrier of identity, both of the individual and of groups. Indeed, it is an instrument for cultural and spiritual development and expression. To constrain language is to constrain human nature. This means to diminish humanity, instead of to elevate and celebrate it. Thus, it should be no surprise that fundamental aspects of the use of language have been secured through international instruments for the protection of human rights, including minority rights. In the work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, these instruments have proven invaluable. They are widely subscribed to and their impetus resonates with majorities and minorities. They are, of course, only minimum standards, and one would hope and expect that such an important matter as human dignity should enjoy something more than the bare minimum of respect. For this reason, we tend to view these issues also in terms of good governance, with the understanding that all States intend to provide for their populations the maximum of freedom and opportunities for individual and collective development. To this end, with the engagement of groups of internationally recognised independent experts of various professional disciplines, the High Commissioner on National Minorities has supported the elaboration of two sets of policy recommendations: The Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, and the Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities. Copies of these are available for distribution at this Congress in the English, Spanish and French languages.\* They also exist in several other languages. A third set of recommendations, the Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life, addresses the no less important issue of participation in relevant decision-making processes. Together, they aim at the full realization of the dignity of each and everyone.

Beyond the values of peace and dignity is the value of enrichment. Since my time is short, let me just say that our common pursuit of civilization should not be reductionist. Rather, it should seek to set free the human spirit and rejoice inter-culturally in the wonderful multiplicity of human thought and expression. Through our collective inventiveness and reflection may we develop? Language, both as a carrier of ideas and as a vehicle of communication, is therefore vital for civilizational development - what some might call progress. From this perspective, as each language diminishes or dies out, our collective wealth is diminished. And so we have a



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public interest to protect and promote the maintenance and development of all languages... for our collective enrichment.

Certainly, the world is complex - perhaps increasingly so, and not only in linguistic terms. Reconciling competing interests, needs and aspirations is never easy. But, it is possible. We must begin by recognizing basic facts, in the first place that every country is pluri-lingual in composition at least to some degree. Then we must apply our fundamental principles, above all those of equality and non-discrimination in rights and opportunities. This might be difficult to imagine within linear and subtractive terms, in zero-sum games. But, it is easier to imagine, and to realise, in arithmetic terms, in particular through additive bilingualism. We should not underestimate the human capacity for language acquisition and use. We can be encouraged by how much has been achieved in many developing countries where normalcy is popular multi-lingualism (despite very limited financial resources). This tells us in policy terms that, at least, not everything turns on money... although I agree that money can help. Rather, we must view policy problems in terms of opportunities, identifying comparative advantages and, above all, richness.

Mr. President, I hope that these few remarks might give some food for thought in the evidently rich range of subjects to be addressed during this Congress. Please accept my sincerest best wishes for constructive and productive deliberations. Your responsibility in these matters is great, and many will be grateful for what you might achieve.

**Thank You.**