

International Mother Tongue Day 2010

Dr. Olenka Bilash

(University of Alberta; Member, Advisory Board, UNESCO's Linguapax (Barcelona))

Today is a special day. Around the world people – multigenerational families - are celebrating, like us, language maintenance, growth and rights. In every country and all major cities groups gather to remind those who live beside them of the risks of language loss and the benefits of language retention. So we are here to both celebrate International Mother Tongue Day and also to become more aware of why UNESCO declared February 21 International Mother Tongue Day in 1999. Four reasons stand out for the declaration of this special day 12 years ago:

- To celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity
- To remain aware of the risks of language loss around the world
- To acknowledge and protect the place of languages in society
- To understand the role of plurilingualism in world peace.

To celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity

Celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity means celebrating mother tongues and the unique worldview embedded in each. The Oxford English dictionary defines 'mother tongue' as 'one's native language'. In some European languages it is called mother tongue (*langue maternelle, Muttersprache*) while in some slavonic languages it is father tongue (as in Polish *język ojczysty*) and in others 'native language' (as in Russian *родной язык* or Ukrainian *ridna mova*). No matter what is called in any language, it is possible to identify the three general uses of 'mother tongue':

that of a private 'language' used among intimate groups of speakers; that of a vernacular which may be used as a regional language; and that of a language which achieves national status and is used on all public occasions of the nation state. (Adams and Tulasiewicz, 2005, p. 6)

Thus in Canada we see immigrant minority 'private' languages such as Arabic, Gujarati, Hindi, Italian, Korean, Mandarin, Polish, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog and many more spoken in homes and ethnic cultural and economic communities throughout our city; indigenous minority languages such as Blackfoot, Cree, Dene, Stony, and Tsuu T'ina spoken on reserved land and in towns and cities throughout our province; and national languages such as English and French spoken in public discourse throughout Canada and supported through the Office of the Commissioner of Official languages. This office was initiated in 1988 along with the [Official Languages Act](#) to ensure the equality of English and French within the Government of Canada and institutions subject to the Act; preserve and develop official language communities; and ensure the equality of English and French in Canadian society at large. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Office_of_the_Commissioner_of_Official_Languages.)

Despite the fact that our official policy of bilingualism offers every Canadian the opportunity to become at least bilingual, this investment of taxpayers' dollars has more

firmly entrenched francophone minority communities and schools in Anglophone parts of Canada than to increase the use of French among Anglophone populations. This may confirm that policy and financial support must be accompanied by the will of the individual and community in order to sustain language acquisition and maintenance.

In multicultural Canada and other English speaking countries our ears hear a wide range of tongues – on public transport, in shops and markets and in the workplace. In the 1980's Tulasiewicz and Adams reported that one street block in London, England displayed 196 languages in written form. In Edmonton's Mill Woods, with a population of more than 110,000, we find people from more than 100 countries and cultures.

(<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~germandb/bin/viewlist.pl?recordlist=503+6156+7463+7472+7584+7633+7678+7680+7681>)

Language loss around the world

How many languages in the world? In January 2010 Wikipedia reported 6,912 languages. But as of February 2010 when Boa Sr, the last speaker of the Bo language of the Andaman Islands, passed away, this number decreased to 6911. The passing of Boa Sr, broke a 65,000-year link to one of the world's oldest cultures. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/04/ancient-language-extinct-speaker-dies>.



Photograph: Alok Das/Survival/Survival

As **Vigdis Finnbogadotter**, former president of Iceland and UNESCO's official Goodwill Ambassador for Languages reminds us at the 2008 celebration of International Mother Tongue Day in Ghana, "Everyone loses if one language is lost because then a nation and culture lose their memory, and so does the complex tapestry from which the world is woven and which makes the world an exciting place." <http://www.mail-archive.com/africanlanguages@yahoogroups.com/msg00644.html>. For more see http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8297&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html and http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=42011&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html



After studying in France, Denmark and Iceland and becoming the first elected President of a democratic nation, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir committed to bring countries together in all domains, especially around women's rights, ecology, and linguistic diversity and multi-lingual education and tries to spread these values to the young people in countries around the world. In October 2003 she sat as a member of the international jury for the Mondialogo School Contest - a joint initiative of UNESCO and Daimler-Chrysler designed to encourage dialogue between cultures and put UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity into practice. See http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=9886&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Africa is the most linguistically diverse continent in the world with over 2,000 different languages. However, up to 300 languages have less than 10,000 speakers, which puts them on the United Nation's endangered languages list, and 37 are in danger of completely dying out in the next few years.

Asserting that "Language diversity is essential to the human heritage," UNESCO's Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003) offers this definition of an endangered language: "... when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children."



UNESCO's online [Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger](#) categories 2,500 languages in five levels of endangerment:

- unsafe
- definitely endangered
- severely endangered
- critically endangered
- extinct.

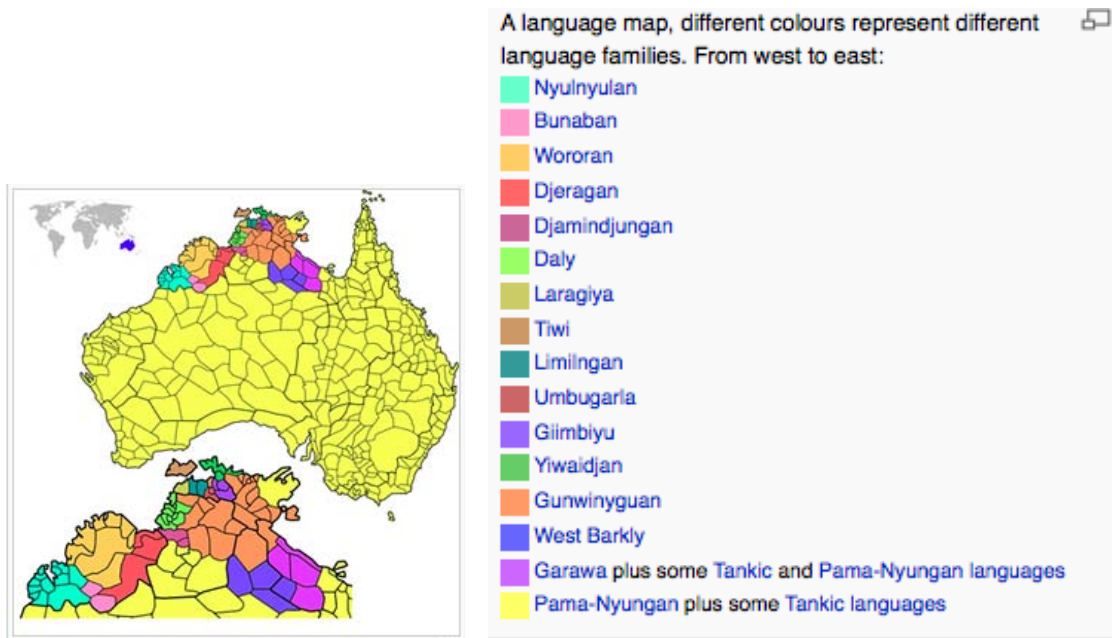
In Latin America languages are also at risk. Historical reports reveal that in the year 1400 there were 1,756 languages. In 1997 linguists reported only 550-700 languages in this same geographic area. This is a loss of over 1000 languages in about 500 years. See http://www.ailla.utexas.org/site/la_langs.html.

In India language diversity is encountered daily. In the reality of classical languages, official languages (of education), administrative languages, languages of business and spoken/familial languages most people must be bi- or multi-lingual. However, language loss is also apparent. Since the national census enables the collection of detailed information about language speakers, the following chart reveals that in 1961 India reported 1,652 languages; by 1991 there were only 1,576 languages, a loss of 76 languages: seven languages have increased in the over 1 million speakers category, 10 languages have increased in the over 100,000 speakers category, eight languages have increased in the over 10,000 speakers category and 25 languages have decreased to the endangered languages category of less than 10,000 speakers.

| Number of Speakers | 1991 | 2008 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|
| > 1 million native speakers | 22 | 29 |
| > 100,000 native speakers | 50 | 60 |
| > 10,000 native speakers | 114 | 122 |
| <10,000 native speakers | 1390 | 1365 |
| TOTAL | 1576 | 1576 |

Based on: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_India

Australian Aboriginal or indigenous society boasts a long unbroken cultural history, dating back around 60,000 years. When the First British Fleet arrived in Australia in 1788, there were estimated to be around 250 Australian languages comprising some 700 dialects. Among them around 20 survive today. Happily through the reversing language shift movement (Fishman, 1991) and bilingual education some of these are spoken regularly and taught in schools. “Kriol, spoken mostly in northern Australia, is the most widely used Aboriginal language and the native language of many young Aboriginals. It contains many English words but the meanings are often different and the spelling is phonetic.” (See <http://www.justlanded.com/english/Australia/Australia-Guide/Language/Language> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_Australian_languages.)



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_number_of_native_speakers. A list of languages by size, type, time and where spoken can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_languages. See also <http://lingformant.vertebratesilence.com/2005/11/10/number-of-languages-in-the-world-to-be-cut-by-half-in-a-century/> and

Significant numbers of aboriginal languages in Canada have either already disappeared or are close to extinction, and among those spoken today, only 3 of about 50 (Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut) are viable with a large population base. Large or small, “viable languages tend to have relatively young speakers, are successfully passed on between generations, and are spoken in isolated or well-organized communities. In contrast, endangered languages are characterized by small population groups, older speakers, and lower rates of language transmission.” <http://atlas.nrcan.gc.ca/site/english/maps/peopleandsociety/lang/aboriginallanguages/1>. See also http://www.fp.ucalgary.ca/howed/abor_lang.htm

Among immigrant or heritage languages spoken in Canada, the second generation born in Canada seems to be the breaking link. In a study of German language retention in Canada Prokop reports that “the second generation was the most indifferent towards language retention (39% of the German sample): in the first generation only 18% and in the third generation 26% were indifferent towards retaining German.” http://www.forumdeutsch.ca/Sonderteil/Dokumente/The_dynamics_of_German_language_maintenance_in_Canada_40_Attitudes_towards_language_retention_by_imm

This trend has also been more recently reconfirmed in the United States among young Asian immigrants in college:

Many students reported that although their families chose to use the heritage language at home, they found that their children were losing fluency. One maintenance strategy reported by several students was use of the "one parent, one language" approach in their homes. One student wrote, "Gujarati was the first language I learned and spoke fluently until the age of five. At home, my mother would speak to me in Gujarati, and my father would speak to me in English." This is a fairly common approach for families trying to raise bilingual children; it can be a good compromise for families who want their children to maintain their heritage language but at the same time don't want them to arrive at school not knowing English. In one study that looked at the one parent, one language approach, Dopke (1992) found that those families whose children did succeed in maintaining fluent bilingualism throughout the period of the study differed from the others in two key ways: (1) the parents were consistent about the approach and most importantly did not let the children respond to them in the inappropriate language; (2) the children had people besides their parents to talk to in the heritage language. Other relatives or neighbors, or social or religious groups that use the heritage language provide necessary language support that offers both further exposure and motivation to the child. (For more information on the one parent, one language approach, see Dopke, 1992.)

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/involuntary.html>

Acknowledging the place of languages in society

Language is not only our major tool of communication but also the medium through which we formulate our view of the world, our ideas, understandings and relationships. Vygotsky (1978) states that all that we learn is mediated through language: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals." (p. 57).

Plurilingualism and world peace

While we all admire people who can speak many languages and recognize the doors that each language opens to such multilinguals, it is the compassion and respect for others gained in the process of living a multilingual life that is most significant. Thus, the United Nations promotes plurilingualism as a vehicle for world peace. Since education is a fundamental part of the process by which individuals are socialized, thereby acquiring values, attitudes and behavioural patterns and since education is acquired and experienced through language and multiple literacies understanding can be created between communities and peace through the teaching of languages.

The Council of Europe of which Canada is a member, promotes plurilingualism, linguistic diversity, mutual understanding, democratic citizenship and social cohesion

and posits that over a lifetime every member of society has the right and need to learn several languages and varieties.

A plurilingual person has a repertoire of languages and language varieties with different levels of competencies within each. Plurilingual education promotes an awareness of why and how one has learned the languages one has chosen, an awareness of and ability to use transferable skills, a respect for the plurilingualism of others and the value of languages and their varieties irrespective of their perceived status in society, a respect for the cultures embodied in languages and the cultural identities of others, an ability to perceive and mediate the relationships which exist among languages and cultures, and a global integrated approach to language education in the curriculum. (Council of Europe, 2006, p.5)

To monitor the state of languages around the world and promote understanding between communities and peace through the teaching of languages, UNESCO created Linguapax in 1987. Former Linguapax president Dr. Felix Marti states that "Linguapax is a network of professionals in the teaching of languages and other subjects who believe in the importance of promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in the education systems of countries around the world. This requires placing a positive value of the diversity in each country and the world, and making a love of one's own identity compatible with respect and sympathy for the different identities of others."

Now a non-governmental organization based in Barcelona, Spain., the Linguapax Institute is "dedicated to the preservation and promotion of linguistic diversity worldwide." Among its areas of concern are [endangered languages](#) and [Multilingual Education](#). Since our globalized world is characterized by a growing interdependence of people, cultures and languages, respect for linguistic communities constitutes one of the factors for peace. If linguistic communities can live in harmony with one another, it helps to create good conditions of security and peace. Learning different languages is a path towards this intercultural comprehension and peace.

Linguapax presents an annual Linguapax Prize on [International Mother Language Day](#) to one individual "in acknowledgement of their outstanding work in the field of linguistic diversity and/or multilingual education."

Joseph Poth, former head of UNESCO's languages division and member of the advisory board of Linguapax describes the link between language policy and the culture of peace:

When a minority mother tongue comes under attack, its users feel uncomfortable and experience an inner conflict. And when people aren't at peace with themselves, they can't be at peace with others. Languages are still the only tools which allow us to communicate--to relate to and understand each other--whether by writing, speaking or through the Internet. This idea of focusing on languages as instruments of dialogue to tackle intolerance and violence has been the driving

force behind UNESCO's Linguapax programme for more than 15 years.
(Interview with Joseph Poth in Ortiz de Urbina, 2000)

Poth further posits that monolingualism is a handicap and we should all learn at least three languages. Speaking only one language

means you only see the world through the inevitably limited dimension of a single language, even if it's a world language. It's also a factor of domination because people who can afford to stay monolingual live in countries that have overwhelming political, economic and military power. And it adds to "linguistic insecurity", a new concept which reflects a very old truth. Even at UNESCO, we see it regularly at international gatherings. Delegates who speak minority languages often don't speak up. They have very good ideas but don't dare to express them because they feel uncomfortable using UNESCO's official languages. People whose mother tongue is an international one are very privileged. It's quite unfair. (Interview with Joseph Poth in Ortiz de Urbina, 2000)

Thus, Poth recommends that each person learn three languages:

Our mother tongue, obviously, a "neighbour" language and an international language. UNESCO's language policy replaces the standard idea of a "foreign" language with the notion of a neighbour language, a language spoken just over the border. We most often go to war against our neighbours, so we have to learn their language, discover their needs and ambitions and know their culture and values. Minority languages are meanwhile steadily disappearing. How can they be saved? A language is always in danger when it isn't part of the school curriculum. Once it's given the status of a teaching language, even for just part of the curriculum, a whole "rescue apparatus" is created and the language becomes alive again and is saved. (Interview with Joseph Poth in Ortiz de Urbina, 2000)



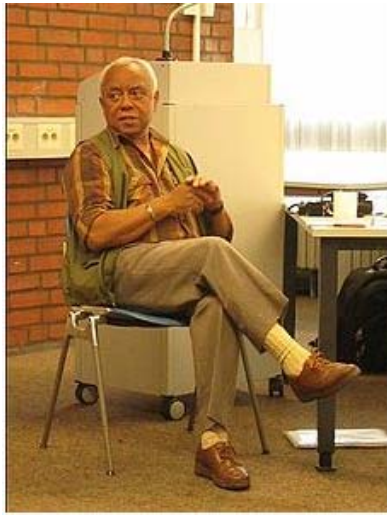
Champions of Mother Tongue Language Education

Who are the champions of mother tongue language education? On this day it is important to know who some of the champions of plurilingual education are. **Vigdis Finnbogadotter**, former president of Iceland, and **Jospeh Poth**, former head of UNESCO's languages division, have already been mentioned. There are many more and they are located throughout the world. Their work in any one part of the world should inspire us all to work locally in our own communities. These language and culture champions all noticed language loss around them and as bi- or multi-linguals they knew from the inside out what the loss of a language would mean to a soul, to a people, to the world. AND they all worked nobly, tirelessly and unselfishly for a world beyond themselves!

Katerina Te Heikoko Mataira was recipient of the 2009 [Linguapax Prize](#) for her contribution to the Maori language and people in New Zealand. Her 30 years of writing books in Maori contributed to making Maori an official language in New Zealand and to the revival of that language. See <http://donosborn.org/blog/?p=71>.



Neville Alexander, a 2008 Linguapax prize winner, is an Apartheid scholar and activist who was imprisoned with Nelson Mandela for 10 years on Robben Island. His books promote language planning and policy, linguistic diversity and multilingual education in post-Apartheid South Africa. As the director of Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), Alexander states: “we have to concentrate on developing a new education system in which all groups of the population can participate. I do not perceive sufficient insight and determination in this respect in South Africa. I believe that the politicians think too much in the short-term. Five years, up to the next elections - often enough, they don't look any further than this. And yet what we really need is a much longer-term education and science policy.” (<http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/1279.html>)



South Africa's 11 official languages:

- Afrikaans
- English
- IsiNdebele
- IsiXhosa
- IsiZulu
- Northern Sotho
- Sesotho
- Setswana
- SiSwati
- Tshivenda
- Xitsonga

<http://cyberserv.co.za/users/~jako/lang/education.htm>

Joshua Fishman, Linguapax Prize winner 2004, is the American linguist who helped preserve/revive the yiddish language and then developed the theory of 'reversing language shift', a series of strategies for helping languages that are fading from use become more and better utilized on a daily basis. Within his 8 point Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) Fishman notes the significant role that 15-24 year old women play in passing on the mother tongue to the next generation:

Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)

Stage 8: most vestigial users of the Language are socially isolated old folks and the Language needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories and taught to demographically unconcentrated adults

Stage 7: most users of the Language are a socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but they are beyond child-bearing age

Stage 6: the Language is used in intergenerational informal oralcy and reinforced in few institutions (eg religion) and its speakers are concentrated demographically

Stage 5: the Language's literacy exists in home, school and community, but without taking on extra-communal reinforcement of such literacy

Stage 4: the Language can be found in lower education that meets the requirements of compulsory education laws

Stage 3: the Language is taught and used in the lower work sphere (outside of the Language neighborhood/community) and involves interaction between native speakers and others

Stage 2: the Language is heard and read in lower governmental services and mass media but not in the higher spheres of either

Stage 1: there is some use of the Language in higher level educational, occupational, governmental and media efforts (but without the additional safety provided by political independence)



Joshua Fishman giving a speech about the Gaelic language at the University of Aberdeen

In *Language Death*, David Crystal (2000) builds on Fishman's hypotheses and proposes six factors which may help a language that is endangered to progress.

An endangered language will progress if its speakers:

1. increase their prestige within the dominant community
2. increase their wealth
3. increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community
4. have a strong presence in the education system
5. can write down the language
6. can make use of electronic technology

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Linguapax prize winner in 2003, is author of *Linguistic Genocide in Education – or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Her many works about linguistic diversity have been published in over 70 languages.

The fewer speakers a language has, the more necessary it is for the children to become high-level multilinguals, in order to be able to obtain basic necessities needed for survival. The mother tongue is needed for psychological, cognitive, and spiritual survival – cultural rights. All the other languages, including an official language of the state in which the children live, are needed for social, economic, political, and civil rights. A child must be able to speak to parents, family, and relatives, to know who she is, to acquire skills in thinking, analyzing and evaluating. The mother tongue(s) is (are) vital for this. Further education, job prospects, and the ability to participate in the wider society require other languages. Thus high levels of multilingualism must be one of the goals of proper education.

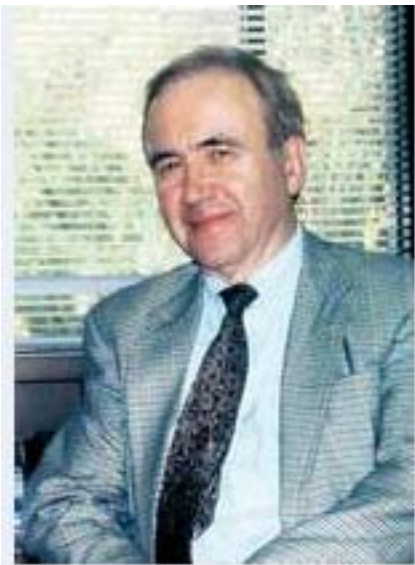
Everybody, not just privileged elites or poor minorities, needs to be fluent and literate in at least two languages, preferably more. . . (Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999, p. 58)

Skutnabb-Kangas compares linguistic diversity to bio-diversity claiming that much of the knowledge about how to maintain the world's biodiversity is encoded in the small Indigenous and local languages. With the disappearance of these languages this knowledge (which is often more accurate and sophisticated than "western" "scientific" knowledge, see ICSU 2002) will also disappear, which means destroying the prerequisites for human life on earth. They could all be gone by 2100 – only 90 years from now!



“Linguistic diversity can be compared to bio-diversity - much of the knowledge about how to maintain the world's biodiversity is encoded in the small Indigenous and local languages, with the disappearance of the languages this knowledge (which is often more accurate and sophisticated than “western” “scientific” knowledge, (see ICSU 2002) will also disappear. . .” which means destroying the prerequisites for human life on earth. These languages and that knowledge could all be gone by 2100 – only 90 years from now!

Jerzy Jaroslaw (George) Smolicz, a multilingual of Polish-Australian descent and recipient of the Linguapax Prize in 2002, developed a theory of multiculturalism which became the basis of policy for state and federal governments. He advocated that immigrants and their children should have the opportunity to contribute to Australian society by maintaining the core values of their home languages and cultures, while adopting overarching Australian values, such as the English language, democratic government, religious tolerance and the sharing of cultural diversity.



Jerzy Jaroslaw (George)
Smolicz AM 1935-2006

“The greatest creativity occurs at the friction edge of cultures. It’s when cultures come together that the greatest creativity occurs. It’s not my own original concept, that’s from TS Elliot.

And we have this friction edge of cultures in our country. We must cultivate it, and this is the way for Australia... I don’t think we are still making sufficient advantage. We are still not utilising our resources. Linguistic resources have been stressed as, as important often as mineral resources.”

<http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/library/media/Audio/id/609.At-the-crossroads-Product-Diversity>

Lily McKay-Carriere, a Cree-speaker from Cumberland House, Saskatchewan has led a movement in her home community to reverse language shift. Beginning with the adoption of a K-grade 3 pilot project in Cree bilingual education, the project has now extended into high school. As assistant principal of the K-12 Charlebois community

school, Lily has created projects that involve elders – the keepers of the language – to develop stories and resources. (McKay-Carriere and Bilash, 2010 a; McKay-Carriere and Bilash, 2010b) Whereas many HL speakers have homelands where they can hear and speak their languages, Canada is the homeland of first nations people. Their languages are at serious risk and it is our collective responsibility to value them.

Josephine Pallard, teacher, leader, community developer, President of IHLA (AELTA, NAHLA) and recipient of the Order of Canada is our local champion for HL and mother tongue education. She is keeper of immigrant needs – their languages, education, professional credentials, and integration into full participation in Canadian society. Like the other champions she knows that "Rome was not built in a day" and has dedicated decades of service, effort, commitment and ongoing fund-raising to see social change. Like her champion peers, she knows how to collaborate with others to make things happen and understands the need to lobby to create both policies and practices.



Champions of language learning:

- surround themselves with the best people in their fields
- learn from others and share those lessons as leaders
- foster shared values with others
- continue to build their multilingual and multicultural identities wherever they are
- belong to a community
- are prepared to change the way they see issues in order to grow and adapt.
- NEVER give up!

At the heart of their work is community.

Like them, you too can make a difference – You can keep your language and culture community strong. Pass on your traditions, your knowledge, your food, dance, beliefs and values. . . and don't forget your language, too.

Closing

Now that we understand that we are a part of an international movement and celebration, know the names and some of the contributions of our significant champions and why it is important to maintain heritage languages (HL) as mother tongues, it is time to extend congratulations to all! To parents for investing in their children's future by offering them opportunities to acquire, maintain and extend their HL and cultural knowledge through

community schools. The weekly driving, overseeing of homework, the discipline of using your HL in the home, the commitment to finding books in the HL and reading them to your children or listening to them read, the effort to find websites in your HL and your modeling are all significant contributions to your child's sense of self-esteem and belonging and of long term career advantage. To children for trusting their families even when they might sooner be at a sleepover or watching cartoons. What you are learning through your HL school gives you a foundation for learning about your families, your history and will offer you the plurilingual advantage among all Canadians. To HL teachers who give unconditionally of their own knowledge and love of language and the world to which it is a key. In Ukrainian we say that people can have either *ukrainoznavstvo* (knowledge of Ukraine and all things Ukrainian) or *ukrainoliubstvo* (love of Ukraine and all things Ukrainian). In your case, HL teachers, you must have both knowledge and passion for the values, traditions, understandings and way of being that you are passing on. To principals of HL schools who insure funding for the HL school and who cross bridges daily between many groups – parents, children, teachers, community organizations, other HL schools, and IHLA – you insure a strong foundation and continuity for your HL school. To IHLA for its leadership in supporting and building capacity within HL communities. No community organization across the country offers more high quality seminars for its teachers than IHLA. And to UNESCO - Since 1999 people around the world celebrate this day and promote the use and value of mother tongues in multicultural and plurilingual societies! Remember that together we are shaping a world that is fairer and more respectful to all and that protects biodiversity and wisdom traditions that are passed on through language. In closing let me congratulate you all again for 365 days of bilingualism – of resistance to mainstream monolingualism and remind you that like each champion mentioned earlier, you, too can make a difference!



Photo credit: facebook Partnership day.

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