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Organización
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Организация
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Message by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of International Mother Language Day**

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The mother language is dear to each one of us. It is in the mother tongue that we utter our first words and express individual thoughts best. It is the foundation upon which all human beings develop their personality from the moment they draw their first breath, and which supports them throughout their lives. It is the school for respect for oneself, one's history and one's culture but, above all, for others and their differences.

For difference inheres in every language as a "second nature".

Specialists know well that languages, far from constituting immutable and closed systems, are always the outcome of much intermingling, interactions and influences over time. No language lacks a history. However cultured and correct our manner of speaking may be, it consists of many borrowed forms, in which identity and alterity intermingle. Etymology rightly refers to this multifaceted history, in which identity is the fruit of diversity and complementarity and which prepares a future marked by other contacts, other points of convergence.

The dialectic bond between identity and diversity is not merely a legacy from the past. In a world in which the global and the local are entwined and must interact harmoniously, the concepts of "mother tongue" and "multilingualism" are becoming structurally complementary. Communication within the family or community sphere is thus coupled with the exercise of the speech at school and at work and in the market, the newspapers, policies, religion, the courts, administration and leisure activities. It is a matter of experiencing all of these aspects of social life in a linguistically appropriate manner.

UNESCO thus endeavours to promote multilingualism, in particular in the education system, by encouraging the recognition and acquisition of at least three levels of language proficiency for all: a mother tongue or first language, a national language and a language of instruction. The promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity is supported by commitment to dialogue among peoples, cultures and civilizations. Diversity and dialogue, identity and alterity are indeed the primary elements of functional complementarity that should be ensured, through multilingualism, in its entirety. This requires harmonious use of the various languages that exist at the national and regional levels and strategies and plans that can promote languages in all situations of life.

Admittedly, despite examples of good practices in various parts of the world, multilingualism seems today to be more an ideal than an actual reality. More than 50% of the 6,000 languages spoken in the world, vehicles of collective memory and intangible heritage, are likely to die out and 96% of these languages are spoken by only 4% of the world's population. Less than a quarter of all languages in the world are used in education and in cyberspace and most of them are used only occasionally. Only a few hundred languages have genuinely been given

pride of place in the education system and in the public domain and less than a hundred are used in the digital world.

Take for example the African continent, the cradle of Humanity, where one-third of the world's languages is spoken! Although they are perfectly mastered by the population groups who use them as daily means of expression, most of these languages are hardly used in education, the administration, justice or the public press. Accordingly, the African Union, which considers languages to be one of the pillars of African integration, is endeavouring to implement a regional language management plan designed to harmonize the local and global in the interest of all.

It is such an open integrated approach, far removed from any purely identity-based conception of languages, which should be retained and, with the cooperation of all of UNESCO's friends and partners, be supported generously in furtherance of a multilingual future of diversity and mutual respect.

Thus, to mark this year's International Mother Language Day, I am launching an appeal for national and regional language strategies to be promoted in such a way as to build a harmonious environment for all the languages of the world.

Koïchiro Matsuura