

International Mother Language Day
21 February 2022, 1.15 p.m.

**Transcript of the remarks by Movses Abelian,
Under-Secretary-General
for General Assembly and Conference Management
and UN Coordinator for Multilingualism**

“Using technology for multilingual learning: Challenges and opportunities”

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to speak before this audience in celebration of International Mother Language Day. I wish to thank Her Excellency Ms. Rabab Fatima and the co-sponsoring Permanent Missions for the invitation and the opportunity to share my views, as UN Coordinator for Multilingualism on this important and timely topic, “Using technology for multilingual learning: Challenges and opportunities”.

Languages and technology share a lot of common characteristics, which makes today’s topic particularly relevant, especially in the age of COVID-19.

Both languages and technology are instruments or, to say it another way, mediums serving a greater purpose. They enable communication within and across human communities, defying geography and time, serving as bridges between distant societies and connecting new generations to their ancestors.

In constant movement, languages and technology are endlessly evolving, adopting characteristics from their peers, with or without their users’ full knowledge, recognition, preparedness, or acceptance.

Quite notably, language technologies have been described as the third revolution as far as human language is concerned. This is following the creation of the alphabet, writing and then the invention of printing. Due to human nature, some undoubtedly saw this evolution in language and early forms of technology as inventive, fresh and exciting, while others were cautious and fearful. With the emergence of the internet and the growth of cyberspace, technology was seen by some as a potential threat to linguistic diversity as it was dominated by a handful of languages. Over the past couple of decades however, technology has been recognized as a tangible and effective tool for language preservation, from language codification to language teaching, among many other applications.

From a broader and more political perspective, the use of language technologies with their added value for the various stakeholders and, in particular, high-quality results can be appreciated as a key driver for multilingualism and a safeguard for preserving and nurturing linguistic diversity. Multilingualism is also a stepping stone for effective and credible multilateralism, which is ultimately what we here at the United Nations are responsible for facilitating.

Supporting multilateralism through the guarantee of multilingualism is my *raison d'être* as head of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management where I oversee language services at the four conference servicing duty stations of the United Nations. Fortunately, the intersection of linguistics and computer science has opened new disciplines such as computational linguistics and natural language processing, which aim to reproduce, and actually multiply, “in vitro”, the magic of the human brain, using artificial intelligence to recognize, understand and generate speech, within and across languages. We seek to take advantage of this.

In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, technology has proven critical, at the United Nations as in many parts of the world, in making business continuity possible and minimizing, to the extent possible, the impact of the disruptions. Thanks to the support of Member States for our continued investment in technology, language services adapted quickly to the constraints placed on us by the pandemic.

- At the beginning of the pandemic, the technology in play at the Secretariat did not support remote meetings. A team which included our interpreters who went the extra mile, looked outside the UN to source and test remote simultaneous platforms. Three were shortlisted and set up quickly, and from June 2020 onward, interpretation was provided to on-site, virtual and hybrid meetings of Member States at all four duty stations on different meeting platforms. Interpreters rallied to ensure our meetings continued, even if it involved some health risks which we are actively addressing.
- At the same time, our translation services transitioned seamlessly to fully remote operations thanks to the Department's long-standing policy of investing in and developing state-of-the-art, web-based tools to support the large-scale production of high-quality, multilingual documentation. Even though we had the tools on hand, the pandemic was a true test for all our translators and editors to utilize the technology at full throttle. We even realized an increase in translation productivity during this time.

While today we are addressing the contribution of technology to multilingualism, I would like to take a moment to celebrate the human aspects of multilingualism of the colleagues I work with, because after all, language is inherently a human characteristic.

The award-winning New York novelist Paul Auster once wrote:

“Translators are the shadow heroes of literature, the often-forgotten instruments that make it possible for different cultures to talk to one another, who have enabled us to understand that we all, from every part of the work, live in one world”.

Nowhere else better than at the UN does this metaphor apply in the most literal manner. Because the UN is the world, and the world comes to the UN bringing along all its complexity and diversity. The staff in my department come from all parts of the globe, and not only do they speak the official languages of the UN, but they also have not forgotten their respective mother languages.

In honour of this year's International Mother Language Day, we put together a video showing the multilingual range of the staff I work with. Some colleagues speak in their mother language, others in a different language, but all talk about their mother language and being multilingual, which is significant for today's celebration. We had 53 volunteers with languages ranging from Afrikaans to Welsh. Here is a sneak preview of some of the staff which we are sharing with you before our social media launch.

Please enjoy and thank you for your attention.