



Chapter 5

CELEBRATING MULTILINGUALISM

Celebrating multilingualism

AT UN GENEVA, MULTILINGUALISM IS PART OF OUR DNA

Multilingualism is a core value of the United Nations and one of the Secretary-General's highest priorities. UN Geneva prides itself on fostering a workplace that is functionally bilingual in English and French, but our linguistic diversity goes even further: collectively, our staff speak nearly 70 mother tongues! Our Multilingualism Action Team supports and promotes multilingualism at UN Geneva. The Team meets quarterly to propose concrete actions, review progress made, and provide advice to the Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva.

Scan the QR code to meet some of the members of UN Geneva's Multilingualism Action Team.



In June and July, to showcase the multilingual spirit of UN Geneva and to promote new internal resources that we have developed for staff to communicate effectively in multiple languages, we installed a photo booth in a busy area of the Palais des Nations and invited all passers-by to take part in impromptu photo shoots.

Scan the QR code to see all the photos from the multilingualism photo booth.



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The Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva, Tatiana Valovaya, shows the languages she speaks, in the multilingualism photo booth.



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The Director of the Division of Conference Management at the UN Office at Geneva and focal point for multilingualism, Kira Kruglikova, holds up signs showing the languages she speaks.



People at the photo booth spoke an array of languages.

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A participant in the multilingualism photo shoot

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Delegates also took part in the photo booth.

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In July, we also relaunched the Director-General's Multilingualism Champions initiative, which seeks to bring together the heads of UN entities in Geneva to advance multilingualism within their organizations. Around 30 senior officials took part in an afternoon of brainstorming and dialogue, during which they discussed existing challenges and explored potential solutions and opportunities to share best practices.

Scan the QR code to see photos from the relaunch of the Multilingualism Champions initiative.



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The Permanent Representative of Switzerland, Jürg Lauber, speaks at the relaunch of the Multilingualism Champions initiative.



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Workshop at the relaunch of the Multilingualism Champions initiative

A SOBERING CONVERSATION ABOUT LANGUAGE LOSS ON INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

An estimated 40% of the global population do not have access to education in the language they speak or understand best. As education and resources for rare and endangered languages continue to falter – a trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – linguistic diversity is under serious threat.

To highlight the importance of preserving linguistic diversity, and the roles that the UN can play in this area, UN Geneva hosted an online discussion on International Mother Language Day, 21 February. Featured speakers included the Chair of Linguistics and Endangered Languages at the University of Adelaide, Australia, Ghil'ad Zuckermann, research fellow in the Department of African and Ethiopian Studies at the University of Hamburg, Germany, Sheena Shah, and the Director of the Division of Conference Management and Chair of the Multilingualism Action Team at the UN Office at Geneva, Kira Kruglikova.

Scan the QR code to watch a recording of the event.



Panellists Ghil'ad Zuckermann (top left) and Sheena Shah (top right) speak at an online event organized by UN Geneva for International Mother Language Day.



CELEBRATING THE SIX OFFICIAL LANGUAGES OF THE UNITED NATIONS

This year, UN Geneva continued to promote multilingualism by celebrating the six official languages of the United Nations.

French Language Day - 20 March Chinese Language Day - 20 April

There are more than 300 million French speakers around the world. At the United Nations, French is one of the two working languages of the Secretariat and is embedded in all our activities and official documents.

This year, to celebrate French Language Day, staff, consultants, members of the diplomatic community in Geneva and students in UN Geneva's language classes were invited to take part in a creative writing competition. Participants were challenged to write a short text related to the theme of "surprise". The winners were invited to read their creations during an online awards ceremony.

The Chief of the French Interpretation Service at the UN Office at Geneva, Olga Markides, speaks at the online awards ceremony for the French-language writing competition.



A group of performers demonstrate Xiepu boat drumming, a form of folk art illustrating the relationship between fishing communities and the ocean, during the Chinese Language Day celebrations.

UN Geneva celebrated Chinese Language Day with an online video festival on the theme of "China Chic", featuring original content and performances contributed by creative people from around the world. The event was organized in collaboration with the Permanent Mission of China and China Media Group. It was introduced by the Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva, Tatiana Valovaya, with remarks by the Permanent Representative of China, Chen Xu, and the President of China Media Group, Shen Haixiong.

Scan the QR code to watch a recording of the event.



English Language Day - 23 April Russian Language Day - 6 June

This year, UN Geneva marked English Language Day with a malapropism competition – a celebration of the language and all its quirks and diversity.

English, in common with every language, can be fertile ground for humorous mistakes. A malapropism is a word that is used incorrectly in place of a similar-sounding one, often with amusing results. Staff and the wider public were invited to submit their favourite linguistic mix-ups. An online award ceremony was an opportunity to commend the participants and discuss English comical linguistics.

The winning malapropisms were:

"Bring your food vultures to pick up your supplies!"

"I mean that's just the popcorn in the kettle black."

"Now you have arrived at your final destiny! Please take your belongings with you and get off the bus. Thank you and we hope to see you again soon!"



Theatrical performance in celebration of Russian Language Day

This year's celebration of Russian Language Day was centred around the Russian language in music and culture, and featured a livestreamed marathon of performances. The marathon was organized with the support of the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation. The participants included the Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva, Tatiana Valovaya, the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, Gennady Gatilov, the Governor of Sverdlovsk Region in the Russian Federation, Yevgeny Kuyvashev, and personalities from the arts community.

Scan the QR code to watch a recording of the event.



Spanish Language Week - October

Spanish Language Week was celebrated in October with a diverse programme of public activities. It included an evening of Latin American music with Al Toque Mestizo, a Geneva-based group that explores its Latin American roots through the sounds, rhythms and poetry of Peruvian music, with accompanying dancers. The concert got the audience on their feet as they danced to the Latin beats in Room XX of the Palais des Nations, which had previously been renovated through a donation from Spain.

The concert was followed by the opening of two photography exhibitions, *Cordel, Trashumancia Viva* by Antolín Avezuela and *España con Otro Enfoque* by Rodolfo Romero, which featured remarks by both artists. The exhibitions remained on display at the Palais des Nations for staff and visitors to enjoy for most of October.

UN Geneva also worked together with a local museum, the Musée d'art et d'histoire, and with the group Palabras+, to host a two-day event that celebrated the Spanish language through literary reflection and discussions.



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Al Toque Mestizo and dancers in full swing during the Spanish Language Week celebrations in Room XX of the Palais des Nations

Arabic Language Day - 18 December



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Artist Maryam Altamimi introduces a visitor to her calligraphy work, presented in the *Drawing a Language* exhibition at the Palais des Nations.

UN Geneva celebrated Arabic Language Day with a series of public events at the Palais des Nations, which included a panel discussion with award-winning Arabic-language authors, a poetry reading, a musical performance, a film showing traditional shadow puppetry, a calligraphy workshop, and special dishes at the UN Geneva cafeteria.

Staff and visitors were able to explore two exhibitions on display: *Threads of Language*, a Palestinian embroidery exhibition with an accompanying video, and *Drawing a Language*, a calligraphy exhibition by Maryam Altamimi. Ms. Altamimi also led an introductory workshop on calligraphy at which attendees learned to write their names in Arabic.

A public-facing hybrid event featured a panel discussion with the novelist and winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (often referred to as the “Arabic Booker”) Hoda Barakat, and the author, editor, and director of the Sindbad collection at Actes Sud, Farouk Mardam-Bey. It also included a shadow puppetry theatre performance by the author and founder and executive director of the Egyptian Traditional Aragoz and Shadow Puppetry Festival, Nabil Bahjat, a poetry reading by Manaf Mohamed, and a live musical performance by Zaid Tayem (playing the oud) and Mohamed Assi.

UN GENEVA HOLDS ITS FIRST-EVER CELEBRATION OF KISWAHILI

With over 200 million speakers across East and Southern Africa, Kiswahili and its various dialects are a powerful lingua franca and cultural connector across the African continent.

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), at its 41st session, in 2021, proclaimed 7 July each year to be World Kiswahili Language Day – the first African language to be recognized in this way by the United Nations.

This July, in collaboration with the Permanent Mission of the United Republic of Tanzania, UN Geneva held its first-ever annual celebration of World Kiswahili Language Day at the Palais des Nations, as part of its Cultural Activities Programme. The Director of the Division of Conference Management at the UN Office at Geneva, Kira Kruglikova, and the Permanent Representative of the United Republic of Tanzania, Maimuna Tarishi, opened the event. The festivities featured Tanzanian cuisine and refreshments, and a film screening, books and cultural products in Kiswahili.

Scan the QR code to see photos from the event.



© UN PHOTO: NORA KHAMIS

The Permanent Representative of the United Republic of Tanzania, Maimuna Tarishi (centre), at the celebration of World Kiswahili Language Day at the Palais des Nations



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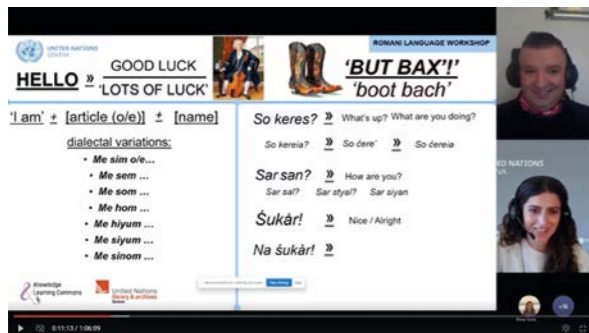
The event featured Tanzanian food and books in Swahili.

THE DELIGHTS AND QUIRKS OF THE ROMANI LANGUAGE

In November, UN Geneva celebrated the World Day of Romani Language. This day has been officially recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as an opportunity to promote the preservation of Romani language and culture, to develop a greater understanding of the customs and traditions of the Romani people across the world, and to celebrate multilingualism and multiculturalism.

At the online event hosted by the UN Library and Archives Geneva, Juice Vamosi, a Romani language expert and special guest speaker, explained the interlinkages between Romani language and history; the existence of Romani loanwords in English, German and many other Indo-European languages; *pachiv*, a form of customary law that is followed by many Romani people; and the importance of including marginalized languages and communities in today's public discourse.

Scan the QR code to watch a recording of the event.



Romani language expert Juice Vamosi (top right) teaches some Romani words to the audience at an online event hosted by UN Geneva for the World Day of Romani Language.

SIGN LANGUAGES UNITE US, MORE THAN EVER



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The Permanent Representative of the Bahamas, Patricia Ann Hermanns, delivers remarks at the International Day of Sign Languages celebration.

For the more than 70 million deaf persons in the world, sign languages – fully fledged natural languages that are equal in status to spoken languages – represent not just a communication tool, but a crucial part of their linguistic identity and cultural diversity.

On the International Day of Sign Languages, UN Geneva partnered with the World Federation of the Deaf and the Swiss Federation of the Deaf to design a full day of cultural activities at the Palais des Nations.

The day began with a sign language pop-up café, sponsored by the Permanent Missions of Australia, the Bahamas, Lithuania and Saudi Arabia. Interacting with videos on a touchscreen, participants explored different sign languages from around the world, and used sign language to order coffee and snacks.

Next was *Hem*, a theatrical performance in International Sign by the group Riksteatern, which centres on the unique challenges facing deaf women and girls who become refugees.

Scan the QR code to watch an excerpt from the play.



The day continued with a high-level panel discussion, featuring representatives from the World Federation of the Deaf, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Ministry of Culture of Panama.

Scan the QR code to watch a recording of the panel discussion.



In honour of the International Day of Sign Languages, we also asked UN Geneva staff to sign the phrase “Sign languages unite us” in different sign languages.

Scan the QR code to watch the “Sign languages unite us” video.



© UN PHOTO: MATIJA POTOCNIK

An attendee uses French Sign Language to order coffee and pastries from a staff member of the Swiss Federation of the Deaf.



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Two actors from the Riksteatern group perform the play *Hem*.



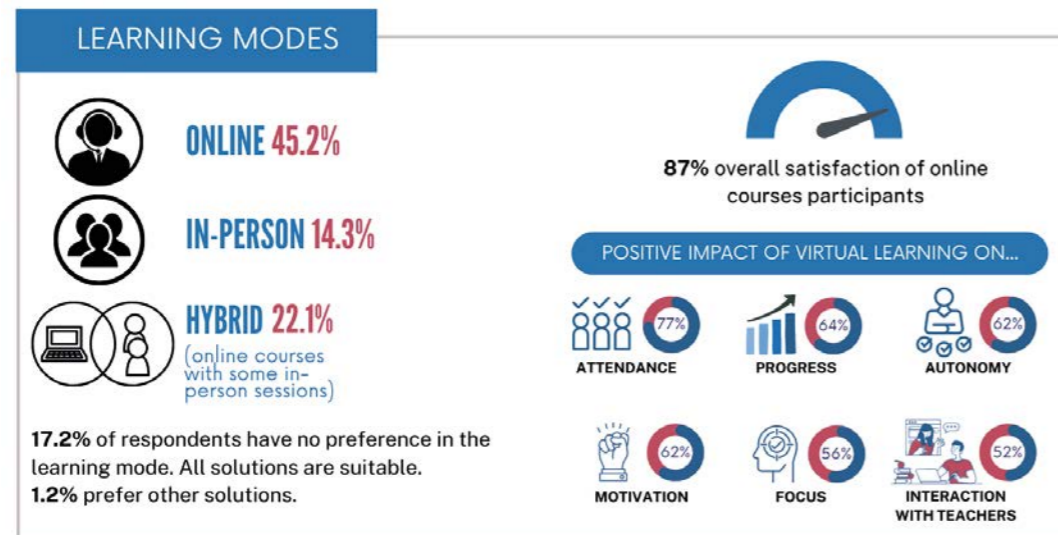
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High-level panel discussion on the theme “Sign languages unite us”

LANGUAGE TRAINING AND THE “NEXT NORMAL”

UN Geneva’s Language Training Programme has experienced a radical transformation in the last few years. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, working arrangements have evolved and training has moved online. In 2022, the Language Training Programme continued delivering on its commitment to adapt to current and future needs in light of the so-called “next normal”.

Against this background, UN Geneva launched a comprehensive survey about its Language Training Programme to ascertain and analyse stakeholder requirements in terms of the objectives, content and format of the courses for the six official UN languages. The results showed that course participants desired maintaining online language training strongly, and reopening the face-to-face courses to a lesser extent. A third option also emerged: hybrid courses, which the Language Training Programme will study in the coming months, all the while continuing to develop content and to align its training with the United Nations Language Framework.



Extract from the results of the 2022 language training needs survey

UN GENEVA PILOTS FRENCH SIGN LANGUAGE COURSE FOR STAFF

UN Geneva partnered with local educational institution Ifage to launch a pilot course in French Sign Language for interested staff, which ran from April to July. The course covered the basics of French Sign Language and introduced the deaf community – culturally, socially and historically.

The course contents included both the theory and the practice of sign language, focusing on the nuances of French Sign Language in particular. Participants praised the high quality of instruction provided by the “exceptional” teacher, Mireille Deschenaux, who is strongly committed to the teaching of sign languages.

Sign language is inseparable from realizing and advancing the human rights of deaf persons, who are a cultural and linguistic minority in many parts of the world. Lack of accessibility can inhibit deaf persons from participating in society, having equal opportunities, and sharing and learning information. While there have been advances in communication, such as subtitling, closed captioning and sign language interpreting, over 70 million deaf persons globally live in a world with accessibility challenges.

Mainstreaming sign languages within UN Geneva’s staff not only supports a more inclusive workplace, it also contributes to a more inclusive multilateralism.



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A UN Geneva staff member signs the phrase “Sign languages unite us” in French Sign Language.

“For me, it’s about inclusion. Not that I have deaf persons working with me on my team, but you don’t necessarily need deaf persons to learn the language, you can do it the other way around!”

MIGUEL
course participant