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Report on the
International Congress of Languages at Risk
(February 25-26, 2020)
and the
High-level event “Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages”
(February 27-28, 2020)
Los Pinos, Mexico City

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The conferences took place in Los Pinos, the former residence of the President of the Republic.

The first conference¹ was organized by the Mexican Ministry of Culture, INALI (National Institute of Indigenous languages) and INPI (National Institute of Indigenous Peoples). It gathered about 400 people (at least 80% from Mexico, while 50% of speakers were from Mexico and many others from South America).

Mexico has 7 million indigenous people on a total population of 130 million people, and 68 different indigenous languages (94 if adding dialects). Indigenous people are very active, and two Institutes are supporting them (INPI) and their languages (INALI), even if it seems that the funding and the spending don't correspond to the size of the planned actions.

It started with a ceremony involving Indian shamans. In the opening session, Irmgarda Kasinskaite-Buddeberg (Unesco) gave a presentation of the conclusions of the International Year of Indigenous Languages. 882 events were organized, 372 IYIL logos were attributed and 124 refused. It involved 94 countries. She had a slide with LT4All pictures and mentioned it as a very successful event. It was followed by a panel discussion on threatened languages. Europe was represented by Monica Perena (Linguapax, Catalonia) while the flag of Catalonia was displayed in the audience. It was followed by two sets of three parallel sessions, all devoted to “Experiences of promotion, planning and revitalization” concerning almost exclusively South American and Mexican Indian languages (+Bali and North American Indian languages by Chief Wilton Littlechild).

Second day started with a talk from two representatives of the Human Rights at the United Nations (Alexey Tsykarev and Kristen Carpenter), in the absence of the UN special rapporteur for the rights of Indigenous people. It was followed by a panel discussion on “Poly-ethnic states and language policies”, where Europe was represented by Aili Keskitalo, President of the Sami Parliament in Norway, and by a set of three sessions in parallel on “Experiences from the public sector to promote linguistic diversity in institutional spaces”. The questions of equal access to administration and justice whatever the language being spoken was addressed and there was a request that

¹ https://site.inali.gob.mx/congreso_internacional_lenguas_en_riesgo/index.html

any person recruited in the framework of organisms intended to support indigenous people should speak their language.

Conclusions were provided in the afternoon. The participants, mostly coming from South, Central and North America were politically very engaged in defending their languages against the colonialist languages (English, Spanish and French). The organization was heavy (TV broadcast, interpretation in English, Spanish and Nàhuatl).

The High Level event “Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages”² was organized by Unesco in collaboration with the Mexican Ministry of Culture and INPI. It was the opportunity to draw the conclusions of the International Year of Indigenous Languages and to announce the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032) decided by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2019. It gathered about 500 attendees, with a large participation of South America and Mexico, and very few attendees from Asia and Europe.

The Director-General of Unesco, Audrey Azoulay, arrived on the 27th and participated in a Press conference with the Mexican President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) at 7 am in the Presidential palace downtown, then participated in the conference inauguration which also included a ceremony by Indian shamans, before going back to France in the afternoon. She was accompanied by the Unesco Assistant Director-General for Culture, Ernesto Ottone. After the opening, a set of presentations were given by various ministers and members of the IYIL Steering Committee on the strategic vision for the IDIL. ACALAN (African Union) was represented by its Executive Secretary, Lang Fafa Dampha. The afternoon started with a keynote address by Grand Chief Wilton Littlechild and a plenary session on lessons learnt from IYIL2019. I presented the Language Technology aspects resulting from LT4All. Then a panel discussion involved several speakers, including Sebastian Stüker (KIT and kites), who gave a real time automatic interpretation demo (English-to-Spanish) and Toby Farmer (Product lead Facebook Artificial Intelligence). There was a social evening event at the National Arts Museum around the “*Voces de la Tierra. Lenguas Indigenas*” exhibition, presenting the relationship between languages and history in Mexico.

The next morning started with a brief plenary talk on the relationship between ecology and language, and by the presentation of the Unesco World Atlas of Languages (WAL) by Irmgarda Kasinskaite-Buddeberg, Dieter Halwachs (University of Graz), Lydia Deloumeaux (statistician Unesco), with an example on the situation in Mexico by Gabriela Pérez Baez (University of Oregon).

It was followed by 3 sets of three sessions in parallel, each with a moderator and a rapporteur. There was one on “Digital Empowerment, Language Technology and Indigenous Media” which was well attended and where I participated. The chair was the Ecuador ambassador at Unesco, and the rapporteur Edie Avila (Rising Voices director, Bolivia). I asked that the information about Language Technology and Language Resources be included in the questionnaire sent in the framework of the WAL. Bengami Mtlhavani (Digital Campaign Manager, South Africa) proposed to form a Working Group

² <https://en.iyil2019.org/events/high-level-event-making-a-decade-of-action-for-indigenous-languages/>

or a sub-committee, including private sector, on Language Technologies attached to the DIL Steering Committee. Sebastian Stüker expressed that machine translation is also a tool for language learning, and that people should master the enabling technology. Jeannette Stewart (founder Translation Commons) said she represented Language Industry, that people must be educated in Language Technologies, which are extremely complex, and that there should be champions for each language. She also proposed to coordinate all actions through a platform they could provide. Cecilia Piaggio (RWS Moravia and LatinoAméricaHabla) said that the existence of indigenous languages can be asserted through digital means and that the needs of the indigenous communities should be taken into account. It was also expressed that some indigenous communities don't have electricity (but it was said that they know how to organize themselves to charge their smartphone batteries) and that some refuse to provide any data during summer time...

The rapporteurs of the 9 sessions presented the conclusions of the sessions, in a plenary session chaired by the Mexican Under Secretary for Cultural Development, who then gave the conclusion of the conclusions.

It was followed by an impressive closing ceremony on the main stage, in the presence of the Minister of Culture, with a philharmonic orchestra, a choir and two opera singers. The director of Unesco office in Mexico mentioned in two different talks Artificial Intelligence for helping indigenous languages, and Language Technologies appeared as one of the 7 priorities in IDIL 22-32 in the conclusions expressed by the Minister of Culture. This was followed by music entertainment including rap music in Sami language.

In addition to the conferences, there was an exhibition of indigenous art craft and artistic poetry, music, cinema and dances.