Final Report

On the Symposium

Multilingualism and COVID-19:
Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

Held by the
Study Group on Language and the United Nations

May 3-4, 2022

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NOTE: The following report is based on notes taken by the rapporteurs in relation to the symposium and does not necessarily represent the exact comments of the participants or speakers.

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1. Introduction, Program Overview, and Attendance

The 2022 annual symposium of the Study Group on Languages and the United Nations marked the 40th year anniversary of this event since its initial inception in 1982. The symposium provided a unique opportunity for organizers, presenters, panelists and attendees to mutually reflect on and respond to the essential role that multilingualism has played in fostering sustainable development in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This two-day virtual symposium brought together stakeholders including United Nations staff members, government officials, university scholars, and members of civil society to address linguistic challenges and innovative solutions with respect to Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3) and Quality Education (SDG 4). Across both days, there were 768 registered participants, a total of five featured speakers, five panels and three welcoming remarks. Day 1 topics addressed multilingualism and equitable healthcare access, the challenges of interpretation during COVID and publishing for sustainable development. Day 2 topics focused on multilingual initiatives, challenges and responses to COVID-19.

The following report includes a summary of the welcoming remarks, featured speaker presentations, paper presentations, and closing remarks.

2. Tuesday, 3 May - Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3)

Welcoming Remarks
Humphrey Tonkin (Chair, NGO Committee on Language and Languages)

Humphrey Tonkin opened the study group symposium with a warm welcome to all attendees and gratitude to all sponsors. International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) volunteers provided interpretation for the duration of the symposium. Though the second symposium held in a virtual format, the first in-person event was held in 1982, making this year the 40th anniversary in the quest to elevate the critical nature of language and languages in the UN for peace, education, and human rights. Tonkin emphasized the timely and necessary nature of this year's topic: Multilingualism and COVID-19: Lessons Learned and Looking Forward.

Featured Speaker - *Multilingualism and the Verified Initiative*
Maher Nasser (UN Department of Global Communications - UNDGC, Outreach Division)

Maher Nasser presented on three public health outreach campaigns designed to "reach audiences where they are" as part of the United Nations Verified program. Verified included content shared in 60 languages throughout the world reaching over a billion people by mobilizing over 70,000 volunteers in the first year alone. Launched in early 2020, campaigns were seeking to fight mis- and disinformation surrounding COVID-19 and provide reliable information about health and safety during the pandemic. The three campaigns that Nasser presented were from communities in South Africa, India, and the Middle East. Verified has been successful by focusing on understanding the audience, listening to their top concerns, and targeting content directly using trusted community leaders and local actors as messengers. Engagement with community members by directly and tapping into individually preferred platforms and languages highlighted multilingualism as a critical component to the success of the campaigns.

Panel- *Multilingualism for Equitable Healthcare Access and Knowledge Development*
Francis M. Hult, moderator

Thomas Abel (University of Bern)
Stacy C. Bailey (Northwestern University)
Susie Sykes (London South Bank University)

Susie Sykes discussed health literacy and the role communities play in the decisions that people make about health, or Critical Health Literacy (CHL). Moving away from the focus on the individual's health literacy, Sykes shifts towards both CHL and Distributed Health Literacy (DHL), focusing on these collective and formerly neglected aspects of health literacy. Though health literacy may vary within a population, individuals can overcome personal deficits in health literacy by combining their knowledge and efforts, for example using online communities or social groups as a place for taking an active role in decision-making, personal, and social action. Fluency in CHL and DHL requires leveraging a collective process and shared resources across communities and moving beyond the focus of the individual. A better understanding of the social processes at play in sharing and sense making across communities in regard to health care and health information will facilitate preventative approaches rather than the current model of "rescuing people downstream" and thinking about the community as an asset in working towards social justice.

Thomas Abel similarly presented information about the need for Critical Health Literacy (CHL) in a pandemic crisis. This presentation highlights the complexities and challenges faced when confronting a global pandemic crisis. These included poor communication, high complexity of actions needed, and uncertainty of scientific knowledge. CHL can empower citizens to share responsibility to improve health and social outcomes. CHL includes reflection on health determining factors and processes with application to appropriate action at both individual and community levels as determined by contextual factors. The promotion of CHL ties into multilingualism as one considers the most appropriate language for a particular context in best leveraging meaningful health interventions.

Stacy C. Bailey discussed Health Literacy (HL) and why it matters, specifically in the context of people with limited English proficiency (LEP). Language is a key component of communication and language barriers. For those with LEP, language can sometimes impede access to health information and healthcare. The COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns about equitable access to healthcare as issues were seen disproportionately affecting underserved populations, typically racially and ethnically diverse communities. Research has shown that low HL is prevalent among those with LEP and poor language access in healthcare leads to worse health outcomes. Bailey called for more multilingual and low literacy materials along with outreach and support programs to promote COVID-19 prevention behaviors and make access to healthcare more equitable.

Break

Featured Speaker - *Publishing for Sustainable Development: How and Why Springer Nature Supports the SDGs*
Nicola Jones (Springer Nature, SDG Programme)

Nicola Jones is responsible for coordinating publishing activity across Springer Nature that focuses on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Jones reported on how Springer Nature brings research that contributes to achieving the SDGs to the attention of those best placed to implement it. Springer Nature delivers the SDGs in three ways: (1) develop ways to facilitate the opening up of access to SDG content in order to reach more people; (2) launch new publications focused on SDG goals and work to reach a broader audience via publication of journal articles and other educational resources; (3) act as a sustainable business, be committed to being carbon neutral and actively use SDG research to better inform its own business. Springer Nature publications focus on the diversity of disciplinary and interdisciplinary work being done around the SDGs. SDG 17 is particularly relevant to the work of Springer Nature which calls for a global partnership for sustainable development. In the spirit of

partnership Springer Natures is a signatory to the SDG Publishers Compact and works with colleges & universities that are signatories to the SDG accord as well as being a member of the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI).

Panel - *COVID and The Challenges of Interpretation*
Lisa McEntee Atalianis, moderator

Ning Ding (UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management - UNDGACM, Interpretation Service)
Linda Fitchett (The International Association of Conference Interpreters)
Severine Hubscher-Davidson (The Open University)

Ning Ding shared her thoughts and experience concerning the deployment of remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI) at the UN during the COVID-19 pandemic. To circumvent multilingualism from becoming a victim of the move to virtual meetings, at the start of the pandemic the UN interpretation services took necessary preparations for transition to RSI. To help interpreters in the transition process to RSI, new virtual platforms and training demos were created. New hardwares such as laptops and monitors were also distributed. Throughout this process interpreters were met with several challenges, mainly clients' lack of or non-use of essential RSI equipment necessary for interpreters to successfully do their jobs. For example, some clients did not use headsets but rather spoke directly into their computer's microphone which contributed to difficulties with audio quality. While there were challenges, there were also timely solutions specific to meeting the new needs of interpreters. To reduce interpreter fatigue, RSI meetings were held for two hours rather than three hours previously common for in-person meetings. There was also additional interpreter reinforcement for longer meetings. More importantly, to prevent the spread of COVID a one person per interpretation booth policy was adopted. Overall, the official launch of RSI was successful and reinforced the perception of the indispensable role of interpreters.

Linda Fitchett presented on the challenges conference interpreters faced during COVID. Simultaneous interpretation was enabled by the rapid development of technology and recent tech developments, and were accelerated during the pandemic. Prior to COVID some forms of remote interpreting occurred via virtual conference platforms such as Skype, WhatsApp, FaceTime and Zoom. There were also preparations for remote simultaneous interpreting via specialized platforms designed for interpretation work. Still, the onset of COVID brought forth increased alienation and cognitive load among interpreters. Interpreters' cognitive load increased because they had to juggle managing technology in addition to interpreting. International Organization

for Standardization (ISO) audio and sound quality standards were not being met in some cases due to the technical limitations of RSI platforms. When interpreters cannot hear clearly they resort to increasing audio volume and raising their voices which eventually lead to more acute work fatigue and longer recovery time. Throughout COVID an increasing number of interpreters reported experiencing headaches, nausea, tinnitus and vertigo. In light of this increase in reports of auditory problems caused by remote working environments, the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) called for urgent medical studies and responsive research. There was also a call for employers to apply cautionary principles in auditory usage and supply interpreters with microphone and audio equipment that meet ISO requirements.

Severine Hubscher-Davidson shared the experiences of translators and interpreters during the pandemic through application of SDG #'s 3, 4 & 8, all which emphasize well-being, quality learning and decent work. The field of psychology of sustainability, which looks at sustainability from the perspective of human psychology, was also a theoretical lens used to explain the well-being of language professionals and in their social-work environments. According to Hubscher-Davidson's research, translators and interpreters face numerous challenges that affect their health and well-being. The first set of challenges are in relation to the process, meaning the text and speeches that they translate and interpret. Second, in relation to their context and work environments. These inherent challenges became even more stressful for linguists during the COVID-19 pandemic. Misunderstandings in COVID-19 related work may have meant the difference between life and death, so in addition to the cognitive stress commonly experienced by linguists there was also an affective element contributing to their stress. In order to effectively focus on multilingualism with respect to good health and well-being, in the future it is important that sustainability of multilingualism become an integral part of pandemic and post-pandemic goals. Professional associations for linguists and other institutions have to play a role in developing structures and resources to better support linguists' mental health. There is also a still need for continuous professional development for linguists in order to respond to new challenging environments. In a final word, Hubscher-Davidson expressed that there needs to be increased awareness among linguists and their employers around the importance of psychological sustainability and mental health in the workplace.

Featured Speaker - *Language, Health, and Justice: Measuring the Challenge*
Mark Fettes (Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems/Esperantic Studies Foundation)

Mark Fettes presented on why language and communication is essential to providing equitable healthcare services. Language choices are always being made regarding how

communication in healthcare should proceed. Government authorities continuously make decisions around what languages are considered essential as part of healthcare services; yet it is difficult for the governments to systematically track how language choice relates to patient health outcomes. Healthcare language policy is guided by the fundamental language policy of the state, which is based on the languages within peoples' repertoire that allow them to express themselves comfortably. Fettes introduced three ways to assess whether a state's language policy mitigates inequities or brings about inequitable results. First, does the state take measures to forbid or interfere with individual language choice? Are individuals able to use any language they prefer to communicate with healthcare providers? Second, does the state take measures to ensure healthcare is accessible to those with different linguistic repertoires. Do hospitals provide at least some services in the languages in which their patients can express themselves comfortably? Third, does the state provide assistance when fundamental language policy leads to inequitable impacts on individuals? Fettes is developing an index for linguistic justice that would address healthcare as a number of key public sectors where language diversity has a significant impact on the distributive effects of public policy. The index would enable comparisons to be made across states and jurisdictions and ideally encourage greater political awareness and discussion on the impacts of language policy in healthcare. Fettes concluded by saying that in order to address issues of inequity there needs to be systemic measures of inequity and an index of linguistic justice would be one useful tool to furthering this discussion.

3. Wednesday, 4 May - Quality Education (SDG 4)

Welcoming Remarks
Humphrey Tonkin (*Chair, NGO Committee on Language and Languages*)
Liberato Bautista *(Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations)*

Humphrey Tonkin opened day two by highlighting the importance of reflecting on what we have learned during COVID-19 and what we should anticipate in the event of another crisis. Language can have positive and negative effects on crises. On the positive side, multilingualism maximizes the transfer of knowledge to people via translations into their local languages. During COVID, public health as a whole could have been improved if those local languages were accessible to scientists and medical researchers so that they could better understand the needs of underserved communities. It is important to question whether we actually learned lessons from our experiences to deploy sustainable development so that we can be better equipped to face similar issues in the future, otherwise we are doomed to repeat our mistakes all over again. This symposium casts light on the importance of language, multilingualism,

and transferred information to shape future policies. It stimulates ideas about the importance of linguistic communication and application to the practicalities of solutions to crises that we face.

Liberato Bautista shared how discussion on COVID and multilingualism would help find solutions to good health, wellbeing and quality of education. In January 2021, Congo issued a statement in English, French and Spanish with a vital education to decrease fear and grow hope in education. This statement confirmed that education is a human right and public responsibility, and that quality of education is crucial to prevent poverty, improve the state of human conditions, and build more inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies. The statement encouraged the use of mother tongue and indigenous languages as a basic educational instruction favoring education for global citizenship in a linguistically diverse world. Quality of education needs to be taken into consideration to enhance values of equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice and to enhance opportunities of peace, prosperity, and friendship among people from different nations. The increase in the use of indigenous languages is crucial to reverse fear and increase hope in the world today. Communication and linguistic justice must help in the healing of the political bodies.

Featured Speaker - *Multilingual Educational Initiatives during COVID-19*
Noro Andriamiseza Ingarao (United Nations, Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, Education Sector)

Noro Andriamiseza Ingarao shared on the important role of multilingual education in dealing with school closures during COVID-19. The pandemic worsened the situation for marginalized students. UNESCO member states, in coordination with UN and local officials, launched a webpage dedicated to indigenous languages that featured resources, initiatives and localized recommendations. It also detailed actions taken by UNESCO member states during the pandemic. Currently, many countries are still faced with the challenge of ensuring the quality of education during COVID. Some countries have managed this issue by developing new channels to provide multilingual education. Countries have used a variety of technologies like social media and tablets to share multilingual content. Some have used solar energy systems to manage the lack of electricity in certain areas. Several countries in Asia relied on radio programs to disseminate learning, and some countries in Africa confirmed the importance of translating to local languages to provide full meaning to help local populations understand COVID-19 preventative care. Latin America and the Pacific depended on translators to translate subjects to local languages, who translated books and used social media channels to communicate with the public regarding COVID-19 issues.

Multilingualism is salient to sustain the future of local cultures and find solutions for educational issues experienced during COVID.

Panel - ***Cross-national Responses to Multilingual Educational Challenges During COVID-19***
Rosemary Salomone, moderator

Pille Poiklik (Ministry of Education and Research, Estonia)
Gisella Langé (Ministry of Education, Italy)
Paul Frank (SIL International)

Pille Poiklik discussed a new initiative from the European Centre for Modern Languages, supported by the European Commission, that observes what happened to language education during the pandemic, develops a guide on practices that were successful, and ultimately considers approaches on how to flourish language education during COVID. In February, 2021 forty countries were surveyed on the successes and challenges language education faced during the pandemic. Survey questions focused on teaching experiences during the pandemic, effects on students and learning assessments, how the challenges changed language education, and lessons learned. The results highlighted the importance of in-person teaching, students' motivation and inclusion, teaching and assessment methods, and hybrid forms of learning.The survey was followed by case studies from different countries, webinars, and a recorded colloquium that can be accessed via Youtube, in addition to a leaflet that contrasted old principles vs. new teaching approaches. Poiklik mentioned that there needs to be more endeavors to listen to the voices of learners as they represent half of the picture, and this task falls on teachers' shoulders. Consulting national authorities is also important towards helping set future goals based on needs, national priorities, and shared interests.

Gisella Langé presented on how Italy is working on development of SDGs 3 & 4. Italy focuses on global citizenship education to empower learners of all ages, as well as teachers, to build more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, and secured societies. After schools were closed in early March 2020 remote learning became the norm. Teachers had to quickly adjust to virtual teaching environments. In response to the COVID outbreak the Italian Ministry of Education (MOE) took three main courses of action. First, it opted to involve a wide range of stakeholders to support school communities, and supplied a variety of educational platforms. Second, it supplied learning technologies for teachers and students who did not have them available at home. Third, the MOE organized online learning communities like the Certilingua program, CLIL/EMILE schools and universities, and University of Toronto/Regional Education

authority who organized online educational projects. Langé concluded by pointing out that Italy's use of content language integrated learning (CLIL), a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching in both content and language, as a critical component in its deployment of quality education throughout the pandemic.

Paul Frank introduced an online library platform called Bloom, which was utilized during the pandemic to disseminate life-saving knowledge to speakers of non-dominant languages. Bloom is a free open-source software that enables users to create books in any language. Bloom can be used to either author new books or translate and adapt existing books. The platform is user friendly and contains both accurate and accessible content. Frank raised the example of one book about how families should deal with COVID-19 which was published in early March 2020 and then two weeks later 60 versions of the book were issued. There were also books produced with narrations for the visually impaired and sign language books authored by deaf and hearing impaired persons. During the pandemic there was a huge increase in the number of books produced. In total, there were 370 COVID-19 books in 201 languages added to the library. Many books have been downloaded onto portable devices such as smartphones. Some books were also printed as posters that were distributed in remote villages by putting them on public transportation, trails, or buildings. Bloom has allowed more opportunity for children who speak non-dominant languages the opportunity to improve reading skills in their mother tongue. However, Bloom is still challenged by an increased need for support and authorship in non-dominant languages that often lack adequate reading materials, therefore more contributions to the Bloom library are welcome.

Break

Featured Speaker - *An Assets-Based Approach for Multilingual Learners*
Joel Gómez (Center for Applied Linguistics)

Joel Gómez introduced the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). CAL was created to serve as a liaison between academics focusing on linguistics, and the practical world of language education and concerns. CAL offers a variety of online resources, including research to policy webinars, a CAL blog, workshops, institutes and technical assistance. Gómez further discussed two workshops that CAL provides, including the Institute for Newcomers in Your School, and the workshop on critical thinking and problem solving in context. In addition, CAL has resources that go beyond K-12 education and higher education that address socio-emotional wellbeing for all ages. In the current stages of the pandemic, CAL is looking to address pre-pandemic inequalities for educating

multilinguals- with a heavy focus on providing multilingual, multimodal formative assessment opportunities for multilingual students, rather than assessing students on monolingual standards. Overall, Gómez stressed the importance of engaging in communication exchange where knowledge is shared in both teaching and learning activities that utilize multilingual individuals' full linguistic repertoire.

Panel- *Situated Multilingual Educational Practices in Response to COVID-19*
Carol Benson, moderator

Ayé Clarisse Hager-M'Boua (Université Alassane Ouattara)
Baoqi Sun (National Institute of Education, Singapore)

Ayé Clarisse Hager-M'Boua presented on language policies in Côte d'Ivoire. Of the 60 languages spoken in Côte d'Ivoire, only four (Baoulé, Bété, Dioula, and Sénoufo) have been chosen to be further developed. Although there is no national language declared in Côte d'Ivoire, French is used as the predominant medium of communication. During the Covid-19 health crisis, the Ivorian government used French in public health centers, and on the radio, TV, or in social media posts to relay important and critical information about the spread of the virus. However, many Ivorians do not understand or speak French, so they were missing vital information in regards to the pandemic. Hager-M'Boua focused on three items: (1) the importance of language in sustainable development, (2) having a national language to cement identity and national unity, and (3) why multilingualism would work as an advantage for Côte d'Ivoire. Hager-M'Boua further noted that bilingual manuals should be developed for common and global diseases, better communication between modern and traditional medicine is needed, and stressed the need for bilingual education in the Ivorian education system.

Baoqi Sun discussed current work on how bilingual students' feelings towards leisure reading and time spent reading shifted during the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore. Little is known about how school closures affect bilingual children's leisure reading in their two languages, and Sun was interested to know what challenges bilingual children faced when attempting to read in their two languages during the lockdown. Research results showed gaps between children's stronger language (English) and weaker language (Chinese/Malay/Tamil), and between children who enjoy and do not enjoy reading. In addition, it was found that very few children did not have access to technology, but many of the students who participated did not use their digital devices for reading purposes. Some implications Sun mentioned include how reading should be integrated into online learning in order to strike a balance between the children's two languages, how more targeted support is needed for less engaged readers, and how

digital reading should be carefully socialized to children's lives, as having access to devices does not naturally lead to more reading digitally.

Closing Panel - *Lessons Learned and Looking Forward*
Humphrey Tonkin, moderator

Carol Benson (Teachers College, Columbia University)
Francis M. Hult (University of Maryland, Baltimore County)
Lisa McEntee-Atalianis (Birkbeck, University of London)
Rosemary Salomone (St. John's University)

Humphrey Tonkin closed the symposium by examining the issues covered over the two days and offering suggestions for the future. Some key points Tonkin, **Francis Hult, Rosemary Salomone, Lisa McEntee-Atalianis,** and **Carol Benson** advocated for include ways to draw together scholars from multiple disciplines to discuss these issues, adding the local context into discussions, the role civil societies play, how the pandemic has highlighted inequalities that already exist, and using multilingualism as a resource. Overall, it was agreed upon that this symposium serves as a great space to continue the conversation across the different disciplines, highlight and address inequalities, and share positive initiatives that are taking place. The symposium ended with a thank you to all sponsors, interpreters, presenters, note-takers, and participants that made this virtual event a success.