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UN marks English Day as part of celebration of its six official languages



Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyoo Akasaka

23 April 2010 – The United Nations marked the anniversary today of William Shakespeare’s death by celebrating English Language Day, the second in a series this year to raise awareness and respect for the history, culture and achievements of each of the six official languages of the world body.

“It was Shakespeare who coined the phrase ‘a feast of languages,’” Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information and Multilingualism Coordinator Kiyoo Akasaka told an awards ceremony at UN Headquarters for the St. Jerome Translation Contest. “It is a phrase we can adapt to our world today, and to the United Nations itself. Multilingualism clearly reflects the bounty of ideas, heritage and spirit that constitutes this feast.”

Last month the UN marked French Language Day with awards in the St. Jerome contest for those translating into French, and similar celebrations will be held throughout the year for the four other official languages on a day of particular relevance to each – Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish. St. Jerome was a mediaeval scholar behind the Latin translation of the Bible.

Mr. Akasaka noted that English has become the lingua franca in many parts of the world, after developing under the influence of Old Norse, French, Latin, and Greek and then absorbing words from many other languages. “The English language has travelled widely, borrowed a lot, and given even more,” he said.

“As Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, I have a great appreciation of the work that our translators, interpreters, editors and experts in terminology undertake across the world. Initiatives such as the St. Jerome’s Translation Contest allow us to honour those who, through their study and skill, are instrumental in guaranteeing that the work of this Organization is communicated in the six official languages, and beyond.”

The 20 March celebration of French coincided with the 40th anniversary of the International Organization of La Francophonie, a group whose members share a common tongue, as well as the humanist values promoted by the French language.

Russian Language Day will be marked on 6 June, the birthday of Aleksandr Pushkin, recognized as the father of Russian literature; the Day for Spanish will be on 12 October, Spain’s National Day; and Arabic Language Day will be celebrated on 18 December, the day in 1973 when the General Assembly approved Arabic as an official UN language. A date marking Chinese Language Day has yet to be approved.

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