

French Language Day

I missed [the UN's French language day](#)! It's not the fact that I missed it that bothers me – I'm late for pretty much everything – it's the fact that there is such a thing as a UN-sponsored French language day that I find surprising to say the least. Why the French language?! I mean good on them but there are around 6,000 equally deserving candidates. Don't get me wrong – I absolutely adore the French language and spent many years learning it (and, unfortunately, even more years forgetting it). But how can it be fair for an international body to honor French with a dedicated day but not Amharic, Berber, Czech, Danish, Ewe, Faroese, Ga, Hindi, Igbo, Japanese, Konkani, Latin, Malay, Nahuatl, Oromo, Persian, Quechua, Romansh, Sylheti, Telugu, Urdu, Vietnamese, Warlpiri, Xhosa, Yiddish, Zulu?! To name but a few.

French language day was celebrated on March 20 to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the [Organisation internationale de la Francophonie](#). France and other Francophone countries celebrated the French language on the same day – during the whole week in fact – as they should. Although, as an interesting aside, while the UN was celebrating with the Francophones or in their name, at least [one French opinion piece](#) scoffed at the notion and listed UN officials as some of the worst offenders against the French language (if this doesn't make sense, [check it out](#): apparently, in practice, UN officials prefer “*un anglais imparfait*” over perfect French).

So, what is the French language's claim to international honor? According to [the UN's press release](#), they are doing it to promote multilingualism. Doesn't make sense? No, it doesn't. You'd have to have a generic, rather than a specific, language day for this proposition to fly. As a matter of fact, UNESCO also has an [International Mother Language Day](#) (Feb 21), which seems a more likely candidate for a celebration of multilingualism.

A comparison of the two press releases exposes the underlying logic: Mother Language Day is for minority languages and French language day – like the days for all the other five official languages of the UN – is for languages of the state.

As it turns out, it's not only French Language Day but each of the UN's six languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish and Russian – now has its own special day! English language day is going to be on April 23. And why do you think that is? Apparently, some dude believes that April 23 is Shakespeare's birthday (Wikipedia says “birthday unknown” but there's probably a whole research tradition debating the bard's birthday out there so I will refrain from making a comment that might expose my ignorance). Although I find it impossible to refrain from saying that celebrating a language day on the birthday of one single writer in that language is so – like ... – 19th century ... surely, a language is the common achievement of all its speakers and a great writer inevitably draws on a linguistic tradition. If it has to be the birthday of a man – and I really don't think it should – Caxton would be a much better candidate – surely the printing press did more for English than Shakespeare. Anyways, Russian Language Day (June 06) is going to be on the birthday of another man, Pushkin “recognized as the father of Russian literature” (by who, I wonder? And why literature all of a sudden?). Spanish Language Day is October 12, to coincide with Spain's national day – I'm guessing that no dude has yet proposed a birthday for Cervantes. Arabic is going to be celebrated on December 18 to mark that day in 1973 when the general assembly approved Arabic as an official language. What a dog's breakfast of rationales! I don't know why they didn't choose the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him, but imagine that the

vagaries of the lunar calendar were too difficult to handle for the bureaucrats at the UN. As for Chinese Language Day, “a date marking Chinese language has yet to be approved.”

French language day and all these other five language days are supposed to celebrate multilingualism. They are “[a means of promoting, protecting and preserving diversity of languages and cultures globally](#).” I don’t think so. Elevating six languages above all others is not a celebration of multilingualism. Rather, it is a monolingual ideology multiplied by six.

The tension that is inherent in the UN’s a mandate to protect minority languages and to do so in a framework of recognized national languages is explored in detail in Alexandre Duchêne’s UN ethnography [Ideologies Across Nations](#). So, that’s my reading recommendation for those of you enjoying an Easter break – although I realize I’m late for that, too.



Alexandre Duchêne (2008). *Ideologies Across Nations* Mouton de Gruyter