



From the Editor

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As IUPAC embarks on the complex but rewarding prospect of coordinating and promoting an International Year of Chemistry as recognized by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and the United Nations, I decided to explore what other International Years have for goals and pursuits. The year 2008 was claimed as the Year of the Potato, Year of Planet Earth, Year of Sanitation, and Year of Languages.

The one I find the most intriguing is the International Year of Languages. Its purpose is to recognize that genuine multilingualism promotes diversity and global understanding. The proclamation supports the premise that cultural richness is based upon diversity in languages. Essentially, we should respect other languages and seek to learn more languages in order to appreciate and communicate with people of other cultures.



While I have been working for IUPAC, I have come to appreciate the unspoken value of cultural diversity. Yet, IUPAC has only one official language—English. Is that a contradiction? Is the organization missing the point to promote plurilingualism (meaning the use of several languages by an individual) and multilingualism (meaning the coexistence of several languages within a given social group). No, on the contrary,

I have come to think that IUPAC can sustain its mission because the organization empowers its members, most of whom are polyglots, to relay IUPAC findings locally and in other languages if they so choose.

IUPAC focuses on the language of chemistry. The Union has a unique role in developing new terminology and in establishing the means to communicate issues relevant to chemistry and chemical sciences. In this sense, the language of IUPAC is chemistry, not English, not French, not Chinese, etc. With a global membership of about 70 countries, the number of languages represented by individual members is probably comparable, if not more. And with such a large representation, IUPAC outreach can be ensured.

In her recent editorial “Languages Matter” that appeared in the *UNESCO Courier* (2008, Number 1), Jasmina Šopova began with a quote by Stendhal: “The first instrument of a people’s genius is its language.” She continued by saying that “Literacy, learning, social integration . . . Everything transits through language, which embodies national, cultural, and sometimes religious identity for each person. It constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of a human being.” As we prepare for a Year of Chemistry, may we find words as powerful as those to convey the idea that chemistry is also a fundamental dimension of human well being.

Share your thoughts and write to us!

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Cover photo: Girl from Bangladesh drinking clean water. Photo courtesy of WaterAid/Juthika Howlader. For more info, see <www.wateraid.org>

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