MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF UNESCO
FOR THE
INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY
(21 February 2001)

The language we learn from our mothers is the homeland of our innermost thoughts. We may travel or live abroad for years on end, study and master other; but we dwell all our days in the very words through which we first came to perceive our surrounding world.

Today is the second time we observe International Mother Language Day, a moment we choose to set aside to honour humanity's manifold linguistic expression. Some six thousand seven hundred languages are spoken on the surface of the globe. Each in itself represents a conceptual universe, a dazzling and complex array of sounds and emotions, associations and symbols, representations of movement and time.

Some languages, to be sure, have enjoyed in their day wider circulation than others as vectors for governance, as the chosen intonation for liturgy, or as useful means of communication between numerous groups on a large geographical scale. But every language, fraught as each one is with its own traditions, moods and creativity, is as valuable and distinct as every irreplaceable human life. The pattern of today's linguistic map represents our motley, preciously diverse human heritage: tangible where scripts and books exist, but intangible and vulnerable where other forms are preferred.

Since the seeds of incomprehension seem to reside in the impermeability of languages – itself productive of the potential diversity of modes of thought, it is here that we must harness the energy to construct peace in the minds of men so as to realize it in their actions and behavior.

Encouraging the learning of languages, developing translation, creating familiarity among cultures through dialogue, which always involves the interplay of at least two voices and therefore of at least two languages, is an expression of peace-building. Still better: turning to account the plurality of languages, exploring the infinite wealth that each contains, demonstrating that their irreducible differences are in reality a source of perpetual