



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

**Address by Khadija Zammouri Ribes,
Assistant Director-General for the Management of Support Services of UNESCO,
on the occasion of World Arabic Language Day**

18 December 2012

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address you on this happy occasion which has brought us together today in this noble Organization to take part in the first celebration of World Arabic Language Day. I am pleased to present to you a brief overview of the presence and place of Arabic in UNESCO's activities.

At UNESCO, languages matter. In 1978, UNESCO's Director-General said: "Owing to its cultural mission, UNESCO cannot look on languages solely from a utilitarian point of view; it must see them as a vehicle of culture which reflects the cultural identity of nations and people and is a means of expressing their own personality."

This view still holds today and Ms Irina Bokova, UNESCO's Director-General, is committed to promoting multilingualism.

In February 2010, the United Nations Department of Public Information, designated 18 December as World Arabic Language Day. In 2012, UNESCO's Executive Board at its 90th session invited the Director-General to promote the celebration on 18 December of every year as one of the international days marked by UNESCO.

Arabic is the language of 22 of the Member States of UNESCO, it is one of the Organization's working languages, it is spoken by more than 422 million Arabs and is used by more than 1.5 billion Muslims.

Arabic at UNESCO

Arabic is one of the six working languages of the two governing bodies of UNESCO: the Executive Board and the General Conference.

Of the Executive Board since **1974**, when the General Conference adopted it as a working language with the same status as the other working languages of the Board.

Regarding the General Conference, it was used for the first time in **1948** at its third session, held in Beirut. Then, from 1966 it was introduced gradually, starting with simultaneous interpretation from and into Arabic at plenary meetings of the General Conference and the meetings of the administrative and programme commissions, and the translation into Arabic of the most important documents. In **1974**, the General Conference at its 18th session modified its Rules of Procedure to read as follows: "Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish are the working languages of the General

Conference". It also decided to consider Arabic as a working language at international and intergovernmental meetings convened by UNESCO in which Arab States participate; and that Arabic will have the same status as the other working languages of such meetings.

Over the years, the Arabic language began to take its proper place: the majority of UNESCO documents were issued in Arabic and the texts of conventions and agreements translated into the language. The Arabic language became equally authoritative, on a par with the other official languages. It became possible for Arab delegations to rely fully on the Arabic texts. Arab governments were then able to send experienced experts in various disciplines as their representatives without requiring of them excellence in a foreign language, since it had become possible for them to rely fully on the Arabic texts and speak in Arabic, confident that their message and views would be conveyed accurately to the other participants.

The reading public for Arabic documents outside the Organization has expanded. UNESCO documents have become an indispensable source of reference for all interested in and concerned by UNESCO's fields of competence, including journalists, media professionals, and officials and employees in government, legislative, and administrative circles, as well as universities and schools.

Arabic Translation at UNESCO

The Arabic Translation Unit is one of the six translation units at UNESCO Headquarters that is responsible for the **translation and revision** of information materials from English, French and Spanish into Arabic of:

- speeches and messages by the Director-General and other material for her (including some web content and the website of the Director-General)
- documents for the two governing bodies – the General Conference and the Executive Board, as well as the Medium-Term Strategy and the Programme and Budget (the C/4 and C/5 documents), and so on.
- administrative and basic texts
- flagship publications (e.g. the EFA Global Monitoring Report)
- other materials for sectors: publications, brochures, booklets, toolkits, etc.
- final reports of major conferences and meetings of UNESCO's intergovernmental bodies,

The Arabic Translation Unit is also involved in producing the Arabic versions of the summary records, proceedings, decisions and resolutions of the two governing bodies.

The Unit takes part in providing the necessary translation services for sessions of the Executive Board, General Conference and their subsidiary bodies, statutory meetings

and major conferences (such as the regional consultations on the C/4 and C/5 documents), at UNESCO Headquarters and in the field.

One of the more difficult tasks facing the Arabic Translation Unit and its staff is how to cope with a voluminous flow of information and different disciplines, and thus with the highly diverse terminology which ranges, for example, from the fields of education, law and the basic sciences to the marine sciences, the earth sciences, the environment and biodiversity and philosophy and other of the human and social sciences, and the cultural and natural heritage, information and communication technology and the Internet, and so on. In many of these fields there is no standard terminology in Arabic readily available as is the case in some other languages. This task has fallen – and still does - to the translators, who spend long hours researching, comparing and innovating, keeping up very attentively with developments in these fields and conveying accurately and faithfully the meaning while safeguarding and maintaining the integrity of the Arabic language, and preserving it from anything that can undermine it as a result of hasty translations and common errors that are reiterated through modern media and communication technologies subject to the influence of unbridled globalization.

As regards the working methods of the Arabic Translation Unit at UNESCO, it should be noted that most translators used to use only pen and ink in their work. Translations were handwritten and sent to the typing pool to be typed up. Working methods evolved and most translators began to record their translations on Dictaphones before sending them to the typing pool. The situation changed greatly as time went by as many translators started to use computers for translation work as well as for text processing and formatting. Translators could then enter their translations into the computer and correct them as needed, and it became possible to use references to revise translations on screen. Now everyone is able to call up to their screens many references and previously-translated documents that are available on UNESCO's website through the document database UNESDOC. They can check the official translation of terms and titles on the database dedicated to UNESCO terminology, UNESCOTERM. It has also become possible to use software packages specially designed to help translators work rapidly and effectively, such as the MultiTrans programme, which enables the recovery of all UNESCO documents that have already been translated so as to avoid wasting time and re-translating texts that already exist in Arabic. It also enables quotations to be extracted from the original sources. In short, translators can now keep up with modern technology and the latest developments in all international organizations. It is thus incumbent upon all staff members, including translators, revisers and minute-writers, to ensure that their performance is as efficient, accurate and rapid as possible.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we already know, the General Conference, at its 20th session, adopted a resolution requesting the Director-General "to take the measures needed to give Arabic the same status [in UNESCO] as the other more widely used working languages" and "to plan concrete action to achieve this" (20 C/Resolution 38.2). Since then efforts have indeed been made to extend the use of Arabic. These efforts include the project based on **“Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud's contribution to the improvement of the**

presence of the Arabic language in UNESCO" through interpretation and the publications and information material of the Organization published in print and on the Internet. In 2006 and 2008, Saudi Arabia generously granted **USD 3 million** to UNESCO for the promotion of the Arabic language within UNESCO. Some stages of the project have been completed, and others are still being implemented. In this connection the Arabic Translation Unit organized a 10-month training course for six nationals from the Arab States during which the trainees were acquainted with the Organization's mission and received intensive training on the computer equipment used in translation and terminology work and on the translation techniques employed in international organizations. Their knowledge of literary Arabic was also reinforced to enable them to redact the texts which they translate in good Arabic, free of common mistakes and the influence of vernacular language. The results of the training were excellent inasmuch as several of the trainees became professional translators working as outside translators with UNESCO and other international organizations or else were appointed as translators at the United Nations or became journalists working in well-known media. They thus became effectively able to improve the presence of Arabic at international level.

There have been other achievements as regards the promotion of the Arabic language in UNESCO through the Organization's website and the social media, including the following:

- as regards **key content**, our website homepage and all major subpages and sectoral sites, together with the Director-General's site, are now in Arabic
- as for **updated news**, UNESCO's homepage and the Director-General's page are **updated daily** in Arabic
- for the **field offices**, we now have **websites in the Arab region** for the offices in Beirut, Cairo, Iraq and Amman. Two training sessions were held to help ensure the creation and maintenance of these sites in both English and Arabic
- as regards the **social media**, since May 2011 UNESCO has been online in **Twitter and Facebook in Arabic, second only to United Nations Headquarters overall** in our social media effort and following only the World Bank and UNICEF in Arabic.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your kind attention, and I wish you a very good day.