



## **2005: “Year of Languages” in the U. S.**

*By Nicholas Q. Emlen*

On February 17, the U.S. Senate passed Resolution 28, declaring 2005 “The Year of Languages.” The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) worked with Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Thad Cochran (R-MS) in 2003 to come up with the idea for the venture, which would help bring foreign language teaching closer to the top of the national educational agenda. ACTFL began a campaign to promote the prominence of foreign language in schools, government policies, businesses, and families, based on the fourteen reasons listed in Resolution 28 for promoting multilingualism in the United States. These arguments for the increased awareness of foreign languages can be grouped into three categories: the cognitive and academic benefits of learning a second language, the economic and political benefits of communicating with other nations, and the current shortage of competent intelligence-gathering linguists.

Resolution 28 has been carefully crafted to bring forward the benefits of multilingualism, and therefore, it is a perfect occasion to educate our society on the related issues of endangered languages and linguis-

tic diversity. Fostering an attitude of linguistic tolerance and understanding is a goal common to the revitalization movement as well as to ACTFL's effort to promote multilingualism. September has been designated "Heritage Language Month", and the focus of the activities and celebrations has been to draw attention to the lesser-used languages spoken in the U.S. Although Resolution 28 does not make explicit mention of linguistic diversity and the endangerment of the world's languages, ACTFL's Year of the Languages activities promote a wider view of the linguistic makeup of our planet.

There have been several commendable attempts to emphasize indigenous and endangered languages during the Year of the Languages. The College of Charleston and the National Museum of Language collaborated with linguists around the country to produce 52 short radio pieces, called Talkin' About Talk, on various questions about language. These questions are directly relevant to understanding language not just as a tool for diplomacy, intelligence-gathering, and cognitive development, but as a universal and all-encompassing aspect of our politi-

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***The Endangered Language Fund***

300 George St., Suite 900

New Haven, CT 06511 USA

e-mail: elf@haskins.yale.edu

www: <http://www.ling.yale.edu/~elf>

## *Announcement*

Roundtable on Endangered Languages of  
Indigenous Peoples of Siberia Institute of  
Ethnology and Anthropology of RAS  
Moscow, October 27-28, 2005

### **Sponsored by UNESCO**

At least some 30 languages in the region of Siberia can be seen as endangered. In most cases, the situation can be defined as critical and requiring expeditious measures to revive and develop the majority of the languages mentioned above. UNESCO recommendations on preservation of the traditional culture and folklore (1989) include preservation and revival of the endangered languages as part of its program.

The main purpose of this project is to estimate the modern social, political, and ethnocultural context of existence of the Siberian minority languages threatened with extinction and work out the basic specific measures to anchor, preserve, and develop them.

The strategic objectives are to guarantee protection of the threatened Siberian languages and provide the context for their revival and development by enacting appropriate laws at the federal and regional levels; and to adapt the most acceptable provisions of UNESCO and the world expertise in preservation and revival of the threatened languages to the legislative and executive practice of Russia.

Organizing Committee/working group and Contact addresses:

Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) Russia 119334 Moscow, Leninskij pr., 32a Tel. of.: (095)9381871 (Tue., Th.), 9385719 Fax: (095)9380600

or

Dr. Sc. FUNK Dmitrij, Head, Dept. of Northern and Siberian Peoples, IEA RAS E-mail: [d\\_funk@iea.ras.ru](mailto:d_funk@iea.ras.ru)

The web site ([www.iea.ras.ru](http://www.iea.ras.ru)), in Russian, contains updated information.

cal, economic, and social lives. The roughly 5-minute radio pieces ask such intriguing questions as, "Are dialects dying in the U.S.?", "Why do languages change?", and "Is there a cure for monolingualism?" The most relevant to the language preservation and documentation effort is the radio piece entitled "How many languages are there in the world?", by Paul Lewis, the new editor of *Ethnologue*, the authoritative statistical resource on the languages of the world. He explains,

[The researchers at *Ethnologue*] estimate, as of this year, a total of around 7,000 languages spoken or signed in the world today. Some of those 7,000 are just about extinct, with only a handful of speakers left. In fact, about a quarter of the world's languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers. At the other end of the scale is a group of very dominant languages. Over the next century, they'll probably drive hundreds, or even thousands of the smaller languages to extinction, just as superstores drive shopkeepers out of business."

Lewis goes on to comment that "you might yearn for the days before the mythical Tower of Babel, when everyone was said to speak the same tongue. But every language is a window on the culture in

which it's spoken, and a window on the human mind. So there are good reasons for us to study them, and preserve what we can of all of them." The first 20 clips of *Talkin' About Talk*, along with a number of links to information about language, can be accessed through ACTFL's website at [www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3963](http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3963).

There have been significant attempts to form a closer relationship between the national foreign language teaching agenda and the understanding of native languages in the United States. On September 23-24, the Oklahoma Foreign Language Teachers' Association hosted the joint Year of the Languages conference with the Oklahoma Native Language Association. The inclu-

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*The Endangered Language Fund*  
300 George St., Suite 900  
New Haven, CT 06511  
USA  
e-mail: elf@haskins.yale.edu  
www: http://www.ling.yale.edu/~elf

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sion of Native American languages in the broader language teaching agenda in the U.S. is an important step in strengthening the base of support for endangered languages. The Native American Languages Act of 1990 provides Federal support for language programs and the continued use of Native languages. Including discussion of these languages in the broader context of second-language acquisition thus furthers the year of languages and the earlier support for indigenous efforts.

According to Marty Abbott, ACTFL's director of education, the Year of the Languages is a kickoff to a longer campaign

called "Discover Languages". This will be an extended effort to celebrate and promote the benefits of language learning, and in the coming years of the campaign, there will be ample opportunity to bring endangered languages and their maintenance into the discussion. There is a need, says Abbott, to "build the appreciation of language", as a cognitive, educational, and diplomatic advantage, but also as a font of culture and humanity.

To find out more about the Year of the Languages and ACTFL, visit the following websites:

[www.yearoflanguages.org](http://www.yearoflanguages.org)

[www.actfl.org](http://www.actfl.org)