Kokuren Daigaku e youkoso. Benvenuti, Bienvenue, bienvenidos, ṭahlan wa sahalan, Shalom habah, huan ying, dabro pazhalovat’, Willkommen, and Gruetzi mitenand in my native language, which is of course just to say welcome one and all to the United Nations University and to the 2008 UNU/UNESCO International Conference on Globalization and Languages — Building on our Rich Heritage.

I address you today in English, even if many languages could be spoken in this room, more I think than at any other conference we may have had here. I wish we could have provided translators for all of them, but we would have needed another hall of this size just to accommodate them. The conference participants alone speak more
than forty languages. English is the only language shared by all of us, with French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Indonesian being shared by some. Thirty-four other languages are spoken by only one person. Despite this impressive diversity, it is very interesting to note that neither Chinese nor Arabic appear on the list, so even at such a gathering as this, we apparently do not cover all six official languages of the United Nations.

This is my first UNU/UNESCO International Conference at which I have the pleasure of welcoming you as host so let me exercise my prerogative to share a few thoughts with you.

Needless to say, that I am proud to be a co-sponsor of this UNESCO/UNU International Conference on Globalization and Languages. My warmest thanks to all who have helped to make this meeting possible: the organizers, the speakers and the sponsors.

A. Language and Globalization

The urge to communicate — to reach out, to connect, to instruct, to share — is primal and ancient. Our facility to communicate is probably the greatest single contributing factor to the success, such as it is, of our species. Obviously there are many ways to communicate, but language is so important, so advantageous, that even the fossil record shows that its acquisition changed the shape of our brains with astonishing rapidity.

Since we first became human we have sought to leave a mark, to pass on what we know. Some scholars believe that the earliest cave paintings may be instruction manuals, painted to teach the tribe and to plan for the hunt.

It may have been the evolution of the hyoid bone that gave us language, or the enlargement of the hypoglossal canal, or a mutation to the “forkhead box P2” gene.

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2 Petroski, Henry (2006), *Success Through Failure: The Paradox of Design*
— or it may well be that we will never know whence language comes from. What we
do know, without a doubt, every single one of us, is that language is at the very core
of our humanity.

In an interview with the magazine L’Express, the linguist Claude Hagège highlighted
a few years ago this link between language and humanity, and here I wish to quote
his words, which are full of wisdom — as well as humor, another very human
characteristic:

The human genius creates instruments that have their own existence. But
our brain evolved rather little in the last hundred thousand years. We are
closer to the crocodiles than the intellectuals believe. We still obey our
limbic brain, which produces the wars, the confrontations, the conflicts of
territories, etc. The aptitude for language is what distinguishes us from the
monkeys. And our languages are what make us most human. It is a good
reason to defend them, no?

I quote this not just because of its relevance to the topic of the conference but
because to me this quote encapsulates some of the core issues that we are charged
to examine here at UNU — and at UNESCO, also — issues of education, conflict,
and peace.

Globalization, too, is an ancient urge to reach out. Since we first stood upright we
have longed to walk further, to explore, to go beyond the horizon … and, very soon
thereafter, to trade.

In The Wealth of Nations Adam Smith noted “the human propensity to truck and
barter, to exchange one thing for another.” It is this propensity that drove the ancient
thalassocracies (maritime supremacy) of Minoa and Phoenicia, and that drives the
global multinationals of today.

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3 It is possible an ancient mutation of this gene gave rise to the proclivity for language. There are
contemporary cases where mutation of or damage to this gene results in aphasia.

4 L’Express, 02 January 2000, «Une langue disparait tous les quinze jours»
But from there to here it has not always been, needless to say, smooth sailing.

B. Lingua Franca

As silk, to take just one commodity was shipped from China to ancient Rome it moved from Chinese trader to Indian, to Arab, to Ethiopian, to Greek and finally to Italian, hearing perhaps as many languages as it saw hands. The benefits of a lingua franca here are obvious, and it could not have taken long for one to arise. Chekhov’s observation that without a knowledge of foreign languages you feel as if you didn’t have a passport must have been very apt indeed to these ancient mariners.

Aristotle and Plato incidentally made a similar journey, or at least their words did when they were absorbed by the Arab world and then rediscovered in the middle ages by European philosophers who found them in their Arabic versions. The philosophers then translated these texts into Latin, including the summaries and comments which had been added by Arab philosophers of the Golden Age, including Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina’s). These Arab philosophers thereby influenced the ideas then taking shape which led ultimately to the Enlightenment. This might be why and how we still have Aristotle and Plato today, and how they have come to be studied by students all around the world including those in the so-called Confucian countries. Confucius of course, has made his own journey but that is enough travelling for one day.

Today we have English, that wonderfully mongrel language, that serves much of the world in the capacity of lingua franca.

I’m a physicist, and until WW II the lingua franca of my field was German, the language of Planck, Einstein, Heisenberg and many other. Now it is English, almost exclusively. Rupert Lee, in his book [The Eureka! Moment:] 100 Key Scientific Discoveries of the 20th Century writes:

Of the thirty-five discoveries dated between 1900 and 1932, fifteen were published in German, nineteen in English, and one in French. The sixty-
five discoveries dated from 1933 onwards were all published in English apart from five, which were published in German.

This puts scientists who do not speak English more or less fluently at a disadvantage. We have seen how scientists benefit from being able to discuss their ideas with each other, and in these discussions non-English-speaking scientists clearly find themselves ‘out of the loop’.

His words point to a serious and growing concern in academia today, that non-English–speaking researchers may be excluded, their research unread, their thoughts unknown, their insights unshared, the ranking of their institutions perhaps disadvantaged because of a language barrier. But the problem is not limited with the scientists. In our everyday life, English plays an ever growing role: The communication sector is dominated by English, but that is not the only example. This is why in many countries teaching English starts at a very early age in preschool or in the first years of elementary school. Whether this goes at the expense of the local language is open for debate.

It is one of the cornerstones of a sustainable global humanity that as many as possible are given the opportunity to learn the common language, to understand it and to formulate ones own thoughts in it.

But then we have to ask the question: how many Aristotles and Platos might we be losing today?

The drive for a common language, mastered by as many as possible therefore creates another important responsibility.

Humans speak with many voices, in different languages and the language is an important aspect of a culture, of a way of thinking. Just remember the different greetings I offered to you a few moments ago. Though they all intend the same they don’t all have exactly the same meaning. Whereas welcome and benvenuto similarly express the wish that the person may have arrived well, the Hebrew Shalom habah means “peace to the one who comes” and the Swiss Gruetsi is a contortion of the German GruessGott, which means I greet you in the name of Good.
Thus language is an expression of the way we think, but even more importantly, our language determines to a high degree not only how we think but also what we are thinking about. A concept requires a notion and a notion calls for a word. Hence the diversity of languages is part of the richness of human experience of human thinking and feeling.

The threads of history and human experience, spun of language, now run through the sharp machinery of modernization and globalization. The threads connecting us to our pasts and leading us from the labyrinth of the present.

Humans speak with many voices, but in our universal quest for a better life, humanity speaks as one. Language does not merely inform our sense of history and progress, it is the core of our understanding, the very means by which we know.
Yes, globalization does create the need for as many as possible to master the lingua franca. But at the same time the linguistic heritage, has to be appreciated and fostered. It has to be allowed to flourish, to grow and to develop in its own way. This heritage is one of the essentials of our cultural diversity and a cornerstone for a sustainable development. Globalization must be about sustainability, about strength in diversity, not its obliteriation. It must allow every human being to find its identity in its own language and in its own cultural environment. We should build on our rich Heritage.

We gather here today and tomorrow to explore what linguistic diversity means to human culture, to human development, and indeed to the sustainability of our future world, thus making a contribution to the International Year of Languages. I wish you a fruitful and enjoyable conference and wisdom in your deliberations.