

AT THE OCCASION OF THE IGU CENTENNIAL CONGRESS 2022 IN PARIS: SOME THOUGHTS ON OFFICIAL PLURILINGUALISM OF INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC ORGANISATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC EVENTS¹⁾

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1 The IGU Centennial Congress 2022 in Paris, 18–22 July 2022

In commemoration of its foundation 100 years ago in Paris, the International Geographical Union (IGU) celebrated this anniversary by an extraordinary congress in Paris – only one year after its postponed and virtual 34th Congress of Istanbul [İstanbul] and two years before its 35th Congress in Dublin/Baile Átha Cliath. Due to the still lasting impact of the Corona pandemic, the Congress was organised in a hybrid format. As the local organiser functioned the French Committee of Geography (CNFG) chaired by Amaël CATTARUZZA with substantial support of Nathalie LEMARCHAND, IGU Vice-President. From IGU side President Michael MEADOWS, Secretary General Barbaros GÖNENÇİL and the rest of the IGU Executive Committee were the main actors.

The main congress venues were located right in the heart of this exceptional city, in the Quartier Latin around the Sorbonne, in the Panthéon Sorbonne and the Institut de Géographie, as well as in the headquarter of the Société de Géographie, all of them easily accessible by public transport and to be combined with lots of opportunities to enjoy the famous sights and culinary offers. In the framework of the Congress also an IGU general assembly and a general assembly of EUGEO, the association of European geographical societies, were held.

Three round tables (“Anthropocene”, “A Planet of Migrants”, and “Open Science”) and three plenary sessions (“Space and Disability”; “Meta Geographies. Major Divisions to Tell the World”, and “Himalayan Mountains in Transition”) were organised. Three IGU commissions, awarded for their great scientific activity, gave conferences (“Geography of Tourism”, “Urban Geography”, “Geography of Governance”). Three exhibitions were ready to be explored: “Faces of exploration in the 19th century”, “Jean Gottmann, an iconography of movement”, “Touching to discover the world. Geography adapted to the visually impaired”.

More than 2,300 scientists, including nearly 2,100 face-to-face participants from 79 countries, took part in more than 263 sessions organised in 30 rooms and 600 time slots on most contemporary themes like anthropocene, climate change, environment, biodiversity, borders, cyberspace and digitisation, urbanisation, governance, migration and mobility, war, pandemics, toponymy, gender

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¹⁾ This conference report is written in English – unusual for this genre in the “Annals of the Austrian Geographical Society” (MÖGG) – because it is linked to considerations on the official multilingualism of international scientific organisations and events and is intended to reach important addressees for this.

and diversity.²⁾ Not surprisingly, the majority of participants came from France (789), followed by Italy (130), Germany (127), Spain (126), the United Kingdom (83), Brazil (76), Poland (75), the United States (65), Switzerland (52) and Japan (49). Austria was with 17 participants slightly better represented than in the IGU congresses before.

Austrians chaired or co-chaired the following sessions:

- “En anthropocène, quelle didactique de la géographie?” (Matthias KOWASCH, University College of Teacher Education Styria, Graz),
- “Invisibilities in population-environment research: exploring the role, the processes and the implications for marginalized people and places” (Marion BORDERON, University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research),
- “Place names as (positive or negative) brands” (Peter JORDAN, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Urban and Regional Research; University of the Free State, South Africa, Faculty of the Humanities),
- “The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on internal and international migration” (Elisabeth GRUBER, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Urban and Regional Research).

Not less than 16 papers presented were authored or co-authored by scientists engaged at Austrian scientific institutions:

- “Climate change and societal implications of urban land surface temperature changes over southwestern cities, Nigeria” (Ayansina AYANLADE, and Lemlem F. WELDEMARIAM, both University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research),
- “Challenges of food security and coping strategies among rural households in Tigray, Ethiopia” (Lemlem F. WELDEMARIAM, Patrick SAKDAPOLRAK, and Ayansina AYANLADE, all University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research),
- “Local autonomy matters in rural development” (Andreas KOCH, University of Salzburg, Department of Sociology and Social Geography),
- “Crop yield response to inter-annual climate variability: assessment of eight crops in guinea ecological zone of Nigeria” (Ayansina AYANLADE, and Lemlem F. WELDEMARIAM, both University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research),
- “Urbanization and the verticality of rural-urban linkages in mountains” (Andreas HALLER, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Interdisciplinary Mountain Research, and Domenico BRANCA, University of Sassari, Italy),
- “GI-Pedagogy: Innovative pedagogies for teaching with geoinformation” (Michaela LINDNER-FALLY, EuroGeo/BORG Oberndorf, Sophie WILSON, St Mary’s University Twickenham, United Kingdom, and Luc ZWARTJES, Ghent University, Belgium),
- “Future challenges for transhumance in western Argentina” (Fernando RUIZ PEYRÉ, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Interdisciplinary Mountain Research, Facundo MARTÍN INCIHUSA-CONICET, Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, Argentina, and Felix DORN, University of Innsbruck, Institute of Geography),
- “Place names as (positive or negative) brands: Examples from Europe” (Peter JORDAN, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Urban and Regional Research, Austria; University of the Free State, South Africa, Faculty of the Humanities),
- “Strengthening local rural autonomy through eHealth Services” (Andreas KOCH, University of Salzburg, Department of Sociology and Social Geography),

²⁾ The author thanks Nathalie LEMARCHAND for providing these and the following data.

- “COVID-19’s influence on im/mobility aspirations of students and young academics” (Elisabeth GRUBER, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Urban and Regional Research),
- “Towards a social ecology of tourism in Austria” (Angela HOF, Working Group Urban and Landscape Ecology, and Martin KNOLL, Department of History, both University of Salzburg),
- “Extraction and retreat: Industrial zones as spaces of more-than-human interactions” (Karin REISINGER, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna),
- “Minority place-name standardization. A comparison of regulations and approaches in Europe. Presentation of a scientific project” (Peter JORDAN, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Urban and Regional Research, Austria; University of the Free State, South Africa, Faculty of the Humanities),
- “How the platformization of care services transforms care relations” (Karin SCHWITER, University of Zurich, Switzerland, and Anke STRÜVER, University of Graz, Institute of Geography and Regional Science),
- “Smallholder farmers’ sensitivities to climate change impacts and adaptation capacities: A case of community-based participatory research in Africa” (Ayansina AYANLADE, University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research),
- “Climate change impacts on water availability and quality: An assessment of socio-resilience” (Ayansina AYANLADE, University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research).



Figure 1: Notre-Dame de Paris, currently under reconstruction (Photo: JORDAN 2022)

What cannot be concealed also in this short report are the significant shortcomings in local organisation. They started with program drafting, on which session chairs had very limited influence and which resulted in a readable and easily accessible online program version only two weeks before the opening of the Congress, while a printed program was never available. They continued with a lot of overlapping, e.g., of opening and closing ceremonies with ordinary sessions, of the IGU General Assembly and the EUGEO General Assembly mutually and with ordinary sessions, with no lunch served as it was usual with earlier IGU congresses, and ended in venues, where in an entire floor with several conference rooms only one toilet (just one room/place) for ladies and gents and no technical assistance with every session were available. The language problems will be addressed in the next section. All this was compensated by the beauty of the city (Fig. 1) and the kindness of the hosts but remains nevertheless a detrimental fact.

2 Official Plurilingualism as a Problem for Scientific Communication

From its foundation the International Geographical Union (IGU) as well as the International Cartographic Association (ICA) practice two official languages: English and French. The International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS) practices even three of them: English, French, German. This can be understood as an expression of internationalism, pluralism, receptiveness for cultural diversity and has of course also its historical reasons. Neither with IGU congresses, nor with ICA conferences so far attended by the author of this report³⁾ this proved to be a practical problem. French occurred ornamentally in opening speeches or was the working language of a few sessions with (usually) small attendance.

With the IGU Centennial Congress 2022 in Paris, however, this was different: not only were most plenary sessions bilingual, but also many ordinary sessions. While the plenary sessions were at least automatically translated by subtitles on the screen – albeit with some time lag and mistranslations like *Belgrade [Beograd] to Beyrouth, Barbaros to Barbarossa* or *Cattaruzza to Kathareusa*, the designation of the older orthography of New Greek, not to speak of misinterpretations of the “ordinary” text – no translations were provided in the ordinary sessions resulting in the fact that some papers were not understood by non-French speakers or could at least not be discussed, because the paper presenters were not able to respond to questions in English.

This raises the principal question whether international scientific organisations and international scientific events should continue practicing plurilingualism or convert to English as the language of sciences of our days. Replacing official plurilingualism by English as the contemporary language of science would mean stepping down from the symbolic, decorative to the practical, functional level of languages. Symbolically, languages are identity markers, they stand for national identity; a plurality of languages for internationalism, multiculturalism, pluralism – nicely decorating these

³⁾ **IGU congresses:** 1992 Washington DC (USA), 1996 The Hague [’s-Gravenhage] (Netherlands), 2004 Glasgow (United Kingdom), 2012 Cologne [Köln] (Germany), 2016 Beijing (China), 2021 Istanbul [İstanbul] (Turkey); **IGU regional conferences:** 2011 Santiago (Chile), 2013 Kyoto (Japan), 2014 Cracow [Kraków] (Poland); **IGU thematic conferences:** 2017 La Paz (Bolivia), 2021 Lecce (Italy); **ICA conferences:** 1989 Budapest (Hungary), 1993 Cologne [Köln], 1997 Stockholm (Sweden), 1999 Ottawa (Canada), 2001 Beijing (China), 2005 A Coruña (Spain), 2007 Moscow [Moskva] (Russia), 2009 Santiago (Chile), 2011 Paris (France), 2013 Dresden (Germany), 2015 Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), 2017 Washington DC (USA), 2019 Tokyo (Japan), 2021 Florence [Firenze] (Italy). However, in contrast to IGU and ICA events, the **ICOS congresses** 2008 Toronto (Canada), 2011 Barcelona (Spain), 2014 Glasgow (United Kingdom), 2017 Debrecen (Hungary), 2021 Cracow [Kraków] (Poland) attended by the author documented very well the problem of French and German “bubbles” in the sense of small sessions, where always the same communicate among themselves.

attitudes. At the practical, functional level, languages are means of communication. Speaking a common language enables communication. A language includes and excludes at the same time: It includes the speakers of this language into a community and excludes others. When we replace the symbolic by the functional role, we arrive at the main task of international scientific organisations, i.e., to provide and facilitate international communication and exchange.

When the ICOS Congress 2011 in Barcelona admitted also Catalan as a conference language and all papers presented by Catalonians and on Catalonia were presented in Catalan, the Catalonians remained and communicated just among themselves missing the opportunity to present their research to the global community of onomasticians they had the exceptional opportunity to host and address. It was a kind of self-isolation that could only be understood in the context of the national charging occurring at that time.

Especially larger and medium size, not so small languages like French, Spanish, Italian, also German, are in danger of this kind of self-isolation: Their speakers think that these communities are large enough to provide for sufficient reception. But in face of a global society and a global scientific community this is not true anymore, and this has become obvious indeed only in the last two decades. Most scientific journals have converted to mainly or purely English articles only in recent times. English is the dominant global trade language already for some time but has acquired its clear position as the language of science only quite recently. In the author's period as the editor of the *Annals of the Austrian Geographical Society* (2009–2017) their share of English articles grew from 10 to 80 percent. When in 2009 it were exclusively non-German-speaking authors who published in English, in 2017 it were in their majority German native speakers just because they wished to address a wider, international audience.

English – Dominant Global Trade Language and Language of Science

Would Ludwik Lejzer ZAMENHOF (1859–1917) live in our times, he would not feel the necessity to invent Esperanto. English has achieved much more in this respect than any invented language could have achieved: It is well-established all over the world, it is an almost “neutral”, not nation-bound language, far from being owned by only one community or nation, because it is so polycentric and tolerant opposite deviations from a standard (SEIDLHOFER 2011). It favours of course English native speakers, but its polycentrism allows (at least in pronunciation) variants that are hardly less significant than those of non-native speakers.

When we look back into history, we had always a language of science. Earlier this was Latin, later French, in the later 19th century and at least in some disciplines even German. Today this is clearly English based on its distinct number-one-position as a global trade language. And it makes indeed much sense to have a language of science, by which all research can be disseminated to the widest audience possible and exposed to comments and criticism. This is, how science works: Findings need to stand objections, not only from the very own language community, but from as many perspectives as possible.

The Ambiguities and Burdens of Official Plurilingualism

It should also be noted that by their two (IGU, ICA) or three (ICOS) official languages the international organisations in question do in fact not practice or demonstrate plurilingualism, but bi- and trilingualism, respectively. Especially ICOS selects three languages for not completely transparent reasons. Why is German one of them and not Spanish, or Portuguese, Arabic, Russian, or Italian,

Polish, Hungarian ...? At least the choice of German looks not justifiable in our days.⁴⁾ But also French has just a sentimental justification due to its position as the former dominant global trade language and its still significant role in diplomacy. Strange as it may sound, reduction to one global language, to English as the contemporary language of science, is more inclusive than practicing two or three official languages. The latter elevates this selection over all other languages – in fact discriminating all others.

From the author's own experience with all these organisations⁵⁾ their current plurilingualism means quite a burden, since all communication (website, newsletter etc.) has to be translated consuming time, sometimes also money and certainly energy that could alternatively be invested into other, perhaps more productive and innovative tasks. It means a special problem with ICOS congresses, where sessions in the three languages have to be accepted, although a session in German (and not much less so in French) attracts only a small audience prompting many German or French native speakers to present in English, if they wish to have their findings to be disseminated widely. Keynote speakers with French or German as their native language face the problem to decide, whether they should use their mother tongue and be understood only by a smaller share of the audience or English and address almost everybody. Small French and German sessions generate exclusive bubbles, exclude the majority of conference participants from certain topics and thus prevent open, all-inclusive communication. International organisations with their international events are to provide for international, inter-cultural communication and leave intra-language communication to national events. With IGU and ICA with their only two official languages these problems are less obvious – at least outside the francophone sphere.

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) is a different case in this respect. As a branch of the United Nations system, it practices of course the six official UN languages (English, French, Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, Russian) in its plenary sessions, where simultaneous translation is provided. This works smoothly and to everybody's satisfaction but is of course expensive and needs special facilities. All side events and all UNGEGN working groups, however, use English as the only working language, when they meet (also when the meeting is in the UN headquarters) or communicate internally, and all communication within UNGEGN except official speeches in plenary sessions occurs in English only (with the minor exception of the new French chair's message in the UNGEGN Bulletin, which is presented in English and French).

UNGEGN and other UN expert groups are also different cases because they are not purely scientific organisations but have also a political aspect and have thus to reflect relevant structures. For purely political institutions like the European Union (EU) Parliament or the EU Commission political considerations rank of course first. Reflecting the variety of European cultures and languages and thus practicing all official languages of EU member countries also as official languages of these institutions is not only an appropriate political symbol but has also a democratic justification as they enable every country delegate to speak in their mother tongue. It is, however, very indicative that when it comes to executive work, i.e., in individual EU institutions like the European Central Bank or the European Court of Justice, internally only one working language is practiced.

⁴⁾ The author dares stating that because his mother tongue is German and appreciates it that such a proposal was so far not made by speakers of other languages. This fact may, however, be taken as a proof that his questioning the justification of French as an official language has nothing to do with any sentiment against French, France or the francophone sphere.

⁵⁾ The author is head of the Austrian IGU Committee and the Austrian representative in the IGU General Assembly, ICA chair of the Joint ICA/IGU Commission on Toponymy and ICA Liaison Officer with UNGEGN, ICOS Vice-President charged with international cooperation, and UNGEGN expert since 1986, from 2006 to 2017 also Convenor of UNGEGN's Working Group on Exonyms.

Convert to English as the Only Official Language!

This leads to the conclusion that it would be high time to convert to English as the only official language of international scientific organisations and international scientific events except UN expert groups. It is, however, clear enough that decisions of this kind need some time of preparation and promotion and will always stir up national(ist) and sentimental feelings and resistance, of course mainly from the languages and nations affected, while most smaller languages and nations would support this.

Reference

SEIDLHOFER B. (2011): *Understanding English as a lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.