

## **CULTURES, LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATIONS**

***Between cultural uniformity and national identity:  
the effects of a dynamics of integration***

***Summary of the conferences and discussions on Friday, September 19, 1997***

<b>Chair:</b>	<b>Madam Norma Fidelia Guevara de Ramirios</b> Vice-President of the Legislative Assembly of the Republic of El Salvador
<b>Vice-chair:</b>	<b>Madam Liza Frulla</b> Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Culture of the National Assembly of Québec
<b>Speakers:</b>	<b>Madam Nadia Brédimas-Assimopoulos</b> President of the <i>Conseil de la langue française du Québec</i> <b>Mr. Luiz Felipe Perret Serpa</b> Rector of the Federal University of Bahia <b>Mr. Luis Eduardo Soto Cavanna</b> Editorial Director, CBS TeleNoticias
<b>Secretary:</b>	<b>Madam Denise Léonard</b> National Assembly of Québec

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*Madam Nadia Brédimas-Assimopoulos is President of the Conseil de la langue française du Québec. With a university background in sociology, she was a professor at the University of Montreal during the 1970s, and now holds a position as a senior administrator there. She was a member of the executive of the Parti québécois from 1981 to 1988, and has worked within a number of organizations, including Amnesty International, the Association canadienne des sociologues et anthropologues de langue française, Radio-Québec and the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation.*

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In the view of Madam Brédimas-Assimopoulos, while the proposed economic integration of the States of the Americas requires the participating countries to open themselves to the world, they will have to assert their respective cultural identities all the more, in order to avoid a growing uniformity of cultural values and content brought about by the increased use of the *lingua franca* in many fields.

Cultural affirmation depends on the protection and promotion of national languages, which can be achieved through legislative intervention. For example, twenty years ago, Québec passed a law which renewed the strength and dynamism of the French language. This law, whose field of intervention remains the public sphere, made French officially predominant, while recognizing the acquired rights of the English-speaking community. Twenty years later, one may state that the principal objectives of the law have been achieved. Québec's experience may certainly enrich the discussions on what it is appropriate to do to protect the national languages in a context of the globalization of markets.

Today, the prosperity of a State depends less on its primary resources than on the capacity of its enterprises to gather and produce information. From the technological point of view, States must therefore adopt a “dynamic approach”, namely to develop effective tools of communication in their national language. This will enable the national cultures, which are at the heart of economic dynamism, to develop in spite of a homogenizing cultural context.

Since culture and the economy are closely linked, the respect of national languages, these vehicles of culture, becomes a central issue in the preparatory discussions for economic integration. It will be important for the participating countries to establish international standards in the four official languages and to make their use official within the supranational organizations which may be set up.

**These considerations led Madam Brédimas-Assimopoulos to propose the holding of a pan-American meeting on the respect of languages and cultures in a broadened NAFTA.**

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*Mr. Luiz Felipe Perret Serpa is Rector of the Federal University of Bahia (Brazil). He is a professor and researcher at various Brazilian universities. He has published writings in the fields of epistemology of science, cultural policy and Brazilian education. He was President of the Council of Education of the State of Bahia, and is now a member of the Board of Administration of the National Association of Directors of Federal Institutions of Higher Education.*

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Basing his remarks on the analysis of the genesis of the modern Nation-State and the role played by the New World in this process, Mr. Perret Serpa argued that the dynamics of the markets in Latin America played a fundamental role in the economic expansion of the Nation-State and in the development of a homogeneous cultural identity that is its own.

The technological revolution has nevertheless changed this reality. Today, the world faces two phenomena of a structural market: permanent instability and deterritorialization. Permanent instability is generated by the new technologies which, by capitalizing on knowledge rather than on material goods, qualitatively modify the market dynamic by increasing the rate of the change processes. The technological revolution has also brought about a certain deterritorialization, since knowledge is not tied to the territory, in contrast to material goods.

Nowadays, the enterprises with the greatest worldwide extension use, produce and disseminate ideas. It is therefore the diversity of knowledge and of ideas that constitutes the most important type of economic capital and on which the future of the market economy depends. The idea of a separation between the economic and cultural fields must therefore be brought into question.

In conclusion, Mr. Perret Serpa stated that it is necessary to foster the diversity of ideas — and therefore of national cultures — while insisting, in a positive and effective manner, on the human value of cultures — even if mercantiled. It is in this way that we will foster the development not only of cultures, of national identities, of languages and of communication, but also of humanity.

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*M. Luis Eduardo Soto Cavanna is Editorial Director for CBS TeleNoticias. He completed studies in international law and political science at the Quito Catholic University. A journalist by career, he has contributed to the establishment of Hispanic television in the United States, in particular by working for the two largest American Spanish-language television networks, Univision and Telemundo. He is one of the founders of CBS Telenoticias, the most ambitious Spanish-language telecommunications project in the world. As editor-in-chief, he has visited many Latin-American*

*countries and has established strategic alliances with the media conglomerates of the hemisphere.*

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In Latin America, over 2,000 tribal dialects were encountered before the wave of colonization that imposed the Spanish and Portuguese languages. Of this number, some 800 still survive, but are on the path toward extinction. Five among these (Nahuatl, Maya, Quechua, Aymara and Guarani) are resisting annihilation, in spite of everything.

Since language is a tool of communication, one may state that everything that is connected with language represents the raw material of culture. In this context, the quality of the language used by a media outlet becomes an eminently cultural gesture, since it has immediate repercussions on the linguistic behaviour of all the persons who enter into contact with messages transmitted through this collective means of communication.

Although it is not the primary function of the media to educate the population, they have the social responsibility to contribute to the maintenance of the quality of language within the population. By assuming this responsibility, the media contribute to the respect of a few of the most important political rights of the citizens, namely the right to investigate, to receive and disseminate information — freedom of information being the cornerstone of all freedoms.

The former colonialism of the countries of Latin America has given way to cultural colonialism through telecommunications by cable and by satellite. In order to counteract this cultural hegemony, it is important for the television networks to promote the national language. Moreover, in order for that language to survive, it must renewed itself and develop. The means of communication must strive fervently to preserve the language. This can only contribute to the consolidation of democracy in our respective countries.

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## ***SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS***

During the discussion period, much emphasis was placed on the danger to the so-called weak

cultures represented by the hegemony of English, especially in the context of an economic integration of the States of the Americas.

If we advance the postulate that language is the principle vehicle of culture and of values, we may presume that in the States where its influence is felt, the omnipresence of English contributes not only to a loss of cultural identity — an identity not yet affirmed in many cases — but also to a growing uniformity of values.

Among the means proposed by the participants to counteract the effects of the preponderance of English, the protection of national languages should be mentioned firstly. An increasing number of States are adopting legislation to officialize the primacy of their language and are setting guidelines for the use of other languages, particularly within the public domain (public services, labelling, etc.)

Moreover, the promotion of the language and culture is also equally important. The most significant actors in this field are the system of education (through the teaching of the language, of history and of literature), the media (through the creation of information channels in the national language) and the new technologies (through software, also created in the national language).

The emergence of an intercultural solidarity, referred to by one of the participants as “Small Cultures International”, would no doubt enable the weaker cultures to occupy their rightful place within the future FTAA.

The participants concluded that, during the discussions preparatory to the economic integration of the Americas, it will be very important not to leave aside the issue of the respect of cultures and languages, and they recommend that a pan-American meeting on this question be held in the context of an eventual broadening of the NAFTA.