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UCSB to Host International Mother Language Day Conference

Sixty-two years ago today, a group of students from the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan) were killed as they participated in the Bengali Language Movement protests. The student activists were seeking to have Bengali recognized as an official language of Pakistan. In their memory, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared February 21 — the date of the protests — as International Mother Language Day.

The Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UC Santa Barbara will commemorate the event with an afternoon conference beginning at 1 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 20, in the McCune Conference Room, 6020 Humanities and Social Sciences Building, at UCSB. It is free and open to the public.

The conference, which brings together a diverse group of scholars, seeks to promote multilingualism, awareness of the plight of language minorities, tolerance toward different cultures and the preservation of linguistic diversity. It will focus on “Language and Identity,” examining the topic from linguistic as well as legal perspectives.

“Worldwide, it is a day to encourage people to continue using their mother language, while learning and using more than one language, to unveil policies in support of language learning and cultural diversity,” said Viola Miglio, associate professor of linguistics at UCSB, and the Barandiarán Chair of Basque Studies in the

Spanish and Portuguese department. “Spanish in California — and in the U.S. in general — suffers the stigma of an immigrant language, and many problems ensue from this lack of status and prestige.”

Celebrating Mother Language Day has become something of a tradition for the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UCSB (this marks the fourth year). The department has a special interest in establishing a more positive image for Spanish, which according to Miglio should be considered a historical language of California. “We believe that promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism fosters tolerance and understanding toward groups with other languages and traditions, and is, therefore, a beneficial service for society at large that language and literature departments such as ours give to the community,” she said.

Among the conference participants are Carole Chaski, a computational linguist and executive director of the Institute for Linguistic Evidence, who will examine models of language for forensic identity; and María M. Carrieri of California State University-Long Beach, whose research focuses on heritage languages and on identity, resilience and heritage language development and maintenance.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.