

The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas  
\*\*\* SSILA BULLETIN \*\*\*

An Information Service for SSILA Members  
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249.0 SSILA Business  
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- \* SSILA statement on ISO 639-3 language codes

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SSILA has received numerous communications concerning the ISO 639-3 standardized language codes, including requests to SSILA for official action. This general letter is in response to those communications and requests. It includes a statement of the circumstances together with a recommended course of action, presented as a resolution to be placed on the agenda of the Business Meeting in Anaheim.

Background  
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Some time ago, ISO (the International Organization for Standardization, <http://www.iso.org>) decided to expand the standard coding system for languages to include all the known languages in the world, not just the few dozen major languages it had until then covered. ISO has circulated the draft of an all-inclusive coding system (formally known as ISO 639-3) that specifies a unique identifier (a 3-letter code) and a standard language name for each of the world's ca. 7000 languages. For the vast majority of languages, the names and codes that ISO is proposing are those employed in SIL's Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com>). Although still technically a draft, the ISO 639-3 code-set is already widely used in language documentation and archiving by such organizations and initiatives as DoBeS, LSA, LinguistList, NSF-NEH DEL, OLAC, and PARADISEC.

When technical international standards of any sort are formally adopted they are no longer private property, but rather belong to the inter-

national community (represented by ISO). In practical fact, however, the expertise and resources needed to maintain any given standard are usually donated by an interested organization (or sometimes consortium), which then administers that standard -- i.e., promulgates it, answers queries, and, most importantly, oversees the making of any additions or changes that become necessary. In the case of the ISO 639-3 codes for living languages, ISO has given SIL this "administrative authority." (LinguistList has been granted the same authority over the standard nomenclature and coding of extinct and classical languages that Ethnologue does not include.)

In its role as administrator of the ISO 639-3 standards for living languages, SIL has set up a system for reviewing and amending the coding and nomenclature, responsibility for which it has delegated to a full-time employee, Joan Spanne ([iso639-3@sil.org](mailto:iso639-3@sil.org)). As the "ISO Registrar", however, she does not report to SIL or the Editor of Ethnologue, but rather to the ISO. Neither Ethnologue staff nor SIL personnel -- nor anyone else, for that matter -- is allowed to shortcut the process of submitting proposals for name and language-code changes. SIL/Ethnologue is a "user" of the standard like everyone else, and subject to the same constraints and requirements as all other users. (It should be noted that use of the ISO 639-3 code set is always voluntary. No organization is required to follow the decisions made for ISO 639-3. This includes the Ethnologue itself.) Spanne herself has made her independence very clear: "I maintain a hard line on this; though I am working as SIL personnel, I am accountable to the ISO 639 Joint Advisory Committee, and the JAC may 'audit' the proposal process at any time they wish."

#### The status of ISO 639-3

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At this point, at least for the indigenous languages of the Americas, the ISO 639-3 draft standards for language names and codes are seriously in need of systematic examination and revision. Although the Ethnologue database is comprehensive and enormously useful, it contains numerous errors and omissions, many (but not all) of which have been carried over to the ISO draft.

These include:

1. Cases where a single language is incorrectly assumed to be multiple languages, and so has multiple names and codes.
2. Languages where multiple languages are incorrectly assumed to be a single language, and so have a single name and code.
3. Cases where a name or code is mistakenly assigned to a language that does not exist.
4. Cases where known, named languages have no code.
5. Cases where the name chosen for a language is not the name by which the language is most commonly known (either by indigenous peoples or by scholars and others).

It is primarily the members of SSILA who have the specific specialized knowledge to make the necessary corrections for languages of the Americas. At the 2006 SSILA annual meeting, an ad-hoc SSILA Language Codes Committee was established, including Willem Adelaar, Gary Holton, Marianne Mithun, Eduardo Ribeiro, and Lyle Campbell (Chair). Intended to facilitate the

identification of errors and omissions in the ISO 639-3 draft standards for indigenous American languages, the Committee put out a call for corrections. While information on some languages has been submitted, the committee is still awaiting finalization of the procedure before submitting the information to the ISO through the SIL administrator.

While it has been a useful first step, this committee has made less progress than originally foreseen, in part owing to the developing controversy over SIL's role in managing the ISO standard that is outlined below. A more robust alternative to this ad-hoc committee is called for.

#### Problems with SIL

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Serious questions have been raised concerning the propriety of giving an organization whose main purpose is Christian Bible translation (with all the cultural and political differences of opinion that entails) the central role in administering the international standards of language nomenclature. Objections to SIL's administrative involvement in setting these standards are especially strong in Latin America, for a number of historical and cultural reasons, but the unease is widespread.

Others, however, with equal seriousness, have argued that an international standard for language designations is needed immediately, and that since SIL/Ethnologue is the only organization which has so far assembled (or which has the resources and infrastructure to assemble in the foreseeable future) a database sufficiently comprehensive for this purpose, there is no alternative to working with and through the editors of Ethnologue. We believe that this point is well taken. We suspect that the only realistic alternative to basing the ISO 639-3 standard on the Ethnologue database is to abandon the project entirely.

A distinction, however, needs to be made between Ethnologue being the ultimate source of the ISO 639-3 draft standard, and Ethnologue's parent organization, SIL, functioning as the administrator of the standard on behalf of the international community. While it has been stated that the office that SIL has set up to manage and amend the ISO standard is open to all, and that SIL is as eager as any other party to see mistakes corrected and the codes and language names improved, the fact remains that the person responsible for this function is an SIL employee, with SIL designated as the official "administrative authority." Those of our colleagues who are reluctant to be associated with SIL for religious, social or political reasons (positions which we, as a scholarly society, neither support nor condemn) are understandably reluctant to cooperate in the important task of correcting and improving the ISO standard while doing so requires dealing with an employee of SIL. Although re-doing the ISO 639-3 draft standard using an alternative to the Ethnologue database seems to us unrealistic, we believe that an alternative arrangement for the management of the standard -- one that can be seen by all parties to be totally independent and neutral -- is both feasible and desirable.

We would like to emphasize that this recommendation is motivated by pragmatic and scientific concerns entirely. While some SSILA members are critical of SIL's evangelistic activities (with consequences for indigenous peoples), there are other SSILA members who are either affiliated with SIL or collaborate closely with SIL colleagues in linguistic work. There is no doubt that Americanist linguistics, and the profession as a whole, owes an enormous debt to SIL. Our research has been greatly facilitated by such freely offered tools as Doulos fonts, Shoebox, and Toolbox, and our scholarship enriched by a multitude

of grammars, dictionaries, and other documentary materials on languages about which we otherwise would have no information. However, we feel it is essential that SSILA as an organization should strive to avoid the major disruption of scholarly communication that threatens to result from the growing opposition to an ISO language-code standard that is managed by SIL.

To this end, the SSILA Executive Committee recommends that the Society take steps to establish a permanent Board of Indigenous American Language Designations, made up of distinguished scholars who are familiar with the problems of language-level classification and nomenclature in the various regions of the Americas, that will serve as the coordinating body for review and improvement of the ISO 639-3 draft standard for the native languages of the Western Hemisphere. This Board will serve as the conduit between individual linguists familiar with specific situations and the ISO. In the immediate future, while the issue of the management of the ISO standard remains under SIL auspices, the Board will exercise its judgment on whether to forward recommendations to ISO through that mechanism. For the longer term, the Board will represent SSILA in advocating and working with other organizations throughout the world to facilitate the creation of an alternative to SIL management of the ISO 639-3 standard.

These recommendations are embodied in the Resolution below, which will be placed on the agenda of the Business Meeting in Anaheim on Saturday, January 7.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### RESOLUTION TO ESTABLISH AN SSILA BOARD OF INDIGENOUS AMERICAN LANGUAGE DESIGNATIONS

Whereas:

(1) It is in the best interest of scholars and the public alike that the standard set of language names and codes adopted by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) should reflect the most accurate and up-to-date information available; and

(2) The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas (SSILA) represents the broadest range of expertise on the languages of the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere;

Be it Resolved that:

[1] SSILA accepts general responsibility for assuring that the language names and codes for indigenous American languages that are adopted as the ISO standard accurately reflect the consensus of scholarly opinion.

[2] To exercise this responsibility, SSILA will form a Board of Indigenous American Language Designations (the "Board"), to be composed of five (5) members of the Society, including two (2) specialists on the languages of North America (where no distinction between representation for Canada or the US is made -- each of the two representatives can represent primarily either languages located in Canada, or languages in the US, or both); one (1) specialist on the languages of Mesoamerica; and two (2) specialists on the languages of South America, with no two members of the Board having primary expertise in the same language family.

[3] The members of the Board will be elected to renewable terms of two (2) years by general vote of the SSILA membership, with the exception of one (1) specialist on the languages of North America and one (1) specialist on the languages of South America, who, in the first election only, will be elected to terms of three (3) years. The first election will open no later than ninety (90) days following the adoption of this Resolution, and all subsequent elections will be part of the regular annual elections of the Society. A member of the Society who wishes to be a candidate for a Board seat that is to be filled at a given election must apply to the Executive Committee, and be certified by the Executive Committee as eligible for that seat, no later than thirty (30) days before the date on which the election opens. If no eligible candidate applies by this date, the Executive Committee will nominate at least one candidate for the seat; in unusual circumstances the Executive Committee may nominate an additional board member if deemed necessary to achieve representation of sufficient geographical diversity on the Board. Each year, following the election, the Board will elect one of its members to serve as Chair for that year.

[4] The responsibilities of the Board shall include:

a. initiating a dialogue with all responsible parties to establish a procedure whereby changes to the existing language names and codes of indigenous American languages may be formally recommended to ISO by an administrative route independent of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL);

b. establishing a procedure to examining systematically all of the existing codes and language names of indigenous American languages with the purpose of identifying errors or omissions, and recommending changes to ISO where needed;

c. establishing a process whereby individuals, groups or institutions with relevant expertise and authority may petition the Board to consider recommending specific changes to the existing language names and codes of indigenous American languages;

d. taking on whatever other activities may be necessary, consistent with the stated purpose of the Board and the Constitution and Bylaws of SSILA, to assure that the standard designations of indigenous American languages accurately reflect the consensus of informed opinion, from scholars and indigenous peoples.

e. reporting to the SSILA Executive Committee each six months on the Board's activities and progress during the three month period just ended, with a written version or summary of this report to be prepared for distribution to the SSILA membership.

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#### 249.1 Correspondence

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\* SIL and ISO language codes  
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From Koontz John E ([John.Koontz@Colorado.EDU](mailto:John.Koontz@Colorado.EDU)) 27 Nov 2006:

One would assume that once the current SIL system became the basis of an ISO standard the continued development of that ISO standard would be independent of the SIL system, though perhaps the two systems would inform each other's continued development as a result of decisions by the two bodies. Or they might diverge significantly. This is certainly what has happened with ANSI and ISO standards for things like computer languages originally developed by particular vendors.

To avoid the apparently desirable SIL scheme simply because it originated in SIL would be foolish. However, to leave the SIL-derived standard under the control of SIL after adopting it as a starting point would be irresponsible. I assume the ISO organization has no intention of being either foolish or irresponsible, but the intimate connection of SIL with the administration of the system as described by M. Paul Lewis in Bulletin #244 (Sept 23 2006) seems ill-advised. I believe it would be ill-advised whether the specific organization in question were SIL or not. It would seem better to place the actual administration of the system explicitly in the hands of the [ISO] committee itself.

--John Koontz  
Lafayette, Colorado  
([john.koontz@colorado.edu](mailto:john.koontz@colorado.edu))

\* Tongva lullaby?  
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From David Chambers ([david.chambers@usa.net](mailto:david.chambers@usa.net)) 28 Nov 2006:

If you go to <http://www.mentalwhir.com/tongvalullaby.html> you will find a short audio file of a lullaby that I learned from my maternal grandfather, Alexander Howison Murray, Jr., (1907-1993), who was born in Long Beach, CA. There is reason to believe that this song, which was handed down the Spanish side of my family, may go back to Eulalia P?rez de Guill?n Marin? (1768-1878), owner of Rancho del Rinc?n de San Pascual and "keeper of the keys" of Mission San Gabriel (see the Wikipedia entry for her).

Can readers of the SSILA Bulletin help me identify the language of the song? Is it (as I suspect) Tongva/Gabrielino?

--David Chambers  
Washington, DC  
([david.chambers@accenture.com](mailto:david.chambers@accenture.com), [david.chambers@usa.net](mailto:david.chambers@usa.net))

\* Early potatoes in BC?  
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From Carla Burton ([symbios@shaw.ca](mailto:symbios@shaw.ca)) 30 Nov 2006:

I am a student at the University of Victoria and am working on a paper in which I try to trace the introduction of the (cultivated South American) potato to the northwest coast of British Columbia. One of the things I am trying to determine from my research is whether or not the potato was around before European contact. There are some stories (unsubstantiated so far) regarding its presence earlier on.

One of the lines of evidence I'm following is linguistic. I am looking for resemblances between the word for "potato" in Andean languages, including Mapuche and other Chilean indigenous languages, and the words locally utilized for various tubers here in British Columbia.

Any word for potato in any language would be appreciated even I don't end up using it in my paper. I currently have about 30 different words, some European and some Indigenous, but it would be great to get others, even if they are duplicates of what I already have.

Any help would be appreciated.

--Carla Burton  
Victoria, BC, Canada  
([symbios@shaw.ca](mailto:symbios@shaw.ca))

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#### 249.2 Typologists Establish Prizes for Reference Grammars

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From Nicholas R D Evans ([nrde@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:nrde@unimelb.edu.au)) 1 Dec 2006:

The Association for Linguistic Typology (ALT) is proud to announce the establishment of two new prizes, the PANINI GRAMMAR AWARD and the GEORG VON DER GABELENZ GRAMMAR AWARD, to encourage and honor achievements in the field of documenting the world's linguistic diversity through the writing of reference grammars.

To be eligible for either of the prizes, a grammar must provide a systematic, accessible, comprehensive, original, insightful and typologically well-informed account of the workings of the language being described, generously exemplified with natural data. Though the normal expectation is that it would deal with a hitherto little-described language, outstanding grammars of better-known languages or dialects thereof may also be considered if they achieve major breakthroughs in a comprehensive understanding of the language. Grammars may be written in any major language, subject to the availability of a sufficient and geographically balanced set of jury members able to read the language.

Entries will be judged by a committee of half-a-dozen distinguished linguists, including a number of judges who have themselves written major reference grammars but also typologists and other categories of grammar-reader. The chair of the jury will be nominated before the submission date by the President of the ALT, in consultation with the Executive committee, and the chair and the president will then constitute the jury once the full set of submissions is known.

ALT grammar prizes will be awarded every two years, with the winner announced in time for them to present a plenary lecture or language tutorial at the next ALT Conference, setting out the most typologically interesting aspects of the language.

There will be two categories of prize, on alternating four year cycles -- one to be known as the Panini Grammar Award, for grammars written as dissertations, and the other to be known as the Georg von der Gabelentz Grammar Award, for published grammars.

For each category, any grammar (respectively) passed as a dissertation or published in the four year period leading up to December 31st in the year preceding the ALT Conference, will be eligible, provided that it meets the conditions above and that the author is a member of the ALT. A grammar that wins the Panini award cannot be submitted at a later date for the Gabelentz award. Six copies of the entry must be submitted to the Chair of the Jury by February 1st of the year following the four year period. In the case of the Panini award only, entries may be submitted as a pdf file with embedded fonts, although submission of bound copies is preferred in the case of countries such as the Netherlands where a non-commercial form of publication of a dissertation is a requirement. Submitted copies remain the property of the members of the jury. It will normally be the responsibility of the applicant to cover the costs of submitting their work, but the Chair will consider applications for assistance in the case of demonstrable financial hardship.

It is planned that the initial award will be made in 2007, as a Panini Award in the dissertation category. Marianne Mithun has kindly agreed to chair the first Panini jury, and anyone wishing to be considered should send their entries to her address:

Marianne Mithun  
Dept of Linguistics  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, CA 93106 USA  
[mithun@linguistics.ucsb.edu](mailto:mithun@linguistics.ucsb.edu)

Prize winners for the Panini award will receive a paid fare to and accommodation and registration at the ALT conference at which they will present their plenary, as well as a collection of reference grammars and other works donated by major publishers in the area. Because of current financial limitations on the ALT Budget, prizewinners for the Gabelentz award will not receive a paid fare to the ALT conference, but other conditions will be identical.

For information on the ALT (and on joining) consult:

<http://www.lanacs.ac.uk/fss/organisations/alt/>

In addition to these new grammar awards, ALT will continue to offer its Junior Award for the best piece of typological research embodied in a doctoral dissertation or equivalent. The next round of these awards, to be decided for the Paris meeting of the ALT next year, will be for a thesis accepted between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2006. The award will consist of payment of travel, per diem expenses and registration fee to attend the ALT VII Conference, to be held in Paris, September 25 to September 28, 2007, and to present a synopsis or element of the prize-winning work as a plenary lecture at that meeting. From 2007 this Award will be known as the JOSEPH GREENBERG AWARD, in honor of the late Joseph Greenberg's fundamental contributions to typology and the interest he showed in encouraging young researchers. To be eligible, those submitting their manuscript must be members of the ALT. They are asked to submit their dissertation by e-mail in pdf format, with any non-standard font in Unicode, to the Chair of the Jury, to arrive no later than February 1 2007. If this proves technically difficult, the candidate is asked to discuss the problem with the chair. A jury, consisting of five ALT members, will be appointed by ALT's President, appropriate to the work submitted. The jury chair is:



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([Schultze-Berndt@ling.uni-graz.at](mailto:Schultze-Berndt@ling.uni-graz.at))

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### 249.3 E-Mail Address Updates

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The following additions or changes have been made to the SSILA e-mail list since the last Bulletin:

Burton, Carla ..... [symbios@shaw.ca](mailto:symbios@shaw.ca)  
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Spanne, Joan ..... [iso639-3@sil.org](mailto:iso639-3@sil.org)

When your e-mail address changes, please notify us ([golla@ssila.org](mailto:golla@ssila.org)).

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The SSILA Bulletin is distributed electronically to all members of SSILA. Non-members may subscribe free of charge by sending their e-mail address to the editor ([golla@ssila.org](mailto:golla@ssila.org)).

SSILA also publishes a quarterly hard-copy Newsletter that contains book reviews, notices of journal articles and recent dissertations, and other news and commentary. The Newsletter and other publications of the Society are distributed only to members or to institutional subscribers.

SSILA welcomes applications for membership from anyone interested in the scholarly study of the languages of the native peoples of North, Central, and South America. Dues for 2006 are \$16 (US) or \$20 (Canadian) and may be paid in advance for 2007 and 2008 at the 2006 rate. Checks or money orders should be made payable to "SSILA" and sent to: SSILA, P.O. Box 555, Arcata, CA 95518. For further information, visit the SSILA website (<http://www.ssila.org>).

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