

USA, Estonia and Russia win the gold medals at the International Olympiad in Linguistics

Press release

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Teams from the United States and Russia took top honors at the Ninth International Linguistics Olympiad in Pittsburgh, Pa., officials announced Friday. In individual competition, students from the U.S., Russia and Estonia each took home gold medals.

The event brought together 102 high school students from 19 countries, including four countries new to the competition: Brazil, Canada, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam. The students were challenged with problems that required them to reason about Faroese orthography, Menominee morphology, Vai syntax, Nahuatl semantics, the rules of Sanskrit poetry and the structure of the barcode language EAN-13.

Out of four gold medals that were awarded at the individual contest, one went to Morris Alper from the USA who got the highest score, and the other three went to Eva-Lotta Käsper from Estonia and Daria Vasilyeva and Alexey Kozlov from Russia. Participants from Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Korea, Latvia, Poland, Slovenia and UK can boast silver and bronze medals.

In the team contest, the gold medal was awarded to one of the U.S. teams, known as “U.S. Red,” which also had the highest average score in the individual contest. The silver and bronze medals both went to Russia: the Saint-Petersburg and Moscow teams, respectively.

“It is the first time the Olympiad was held outside Europe, and we are happy that participants from all over the world made their way to the USA,” said Lori Levin, Organizing Committee chair and an associate research professor at Carnegie Mellon University, the host of the event.

How could participants have had knowledge of the exotic languages and sign systems that were the basis of the problems in the competition? The idea of the Olympiad is that they don’t need specific knowledge of the languages. Rather, as would any linguist investigating an unknown language, the competitors used the data provided and logical thinking to discover the properties of each language and answer related questions.

The problems for the contest were prepared by the International Program Committee chaired by Adam Hesterberg from Princeton University. “It is not always easy to compose a problem on a language that none of the participants would know,” says Program Committee member Aleksandrs Berdičevskis from the University of Bergen. “But with some six thousand living languages, not to mention the dead ones, we hope we will have enough material for many more future Olympiads”.

The primary purpose of the event is to raise public awareness of linguistics. “Linguistics is not a school subject, and students often don’t even know the word,” says Ivan Derzhanski, co-chair of the International Board and associate professor at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. “Our contest is one of the ways of telling them what a fascinating science it is.”

The next Olympiad will be held in Slovenia in 2012.

This year’s Olympiad received major support from the National Science Foundation and additional support from the Linguistic Society of America, the Association for Computational Linguistics, and academic departments at Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh.

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Links:

Problems: <http://www.ioling.org/problems/2011/>

Detailed results: <http://www.ioling.org/results/2011/>

Interviews with participants: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/2011-International-Linguistics-Olympiad/230095130337783>