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DEMOCRATIZATION OF LANGUAGE CHOICE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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“Is a Frenchman a man?”

“Yes.”

“Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan’ he talk like a man?”

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Introduction

Language choice is a fundamental characteristic of intercultural communication. And although language is recognized as the primary datum in intercultural communication, it has not received as much attention as it should from intercultural communication scholars (Gudykunst, 1983). In intercultural communication where people of different languages meet, language choice is critical, because a person’s native language is an essential part of culture and identity. Cherry (1971) points out, “A person’s language forms a major part of his own identity.... It is one source of his pride and self-respect” (p. 16). So language choice should be made with due carefulness and sensitivity.

However, language choice is hardly discussed in the actual intercultural communication situations. Instead, it is usually the case that a language of perceived cultural and political value, e.g., English, predominates in communication. This unfortunate and undemocratic practice significantly deprives the people of politically submissive countries of the freedom and right to express themselves freely in intercultural communication.

In order to address the problem, I shall be concerned with the following three points:

1. A theoretical discussion of the formulation of principles in democratic intercultural communication.
2. A discussion of the concept of “interlingual communication” as an effective solution to the problem of language choice in intercultural communication.
3. A critical examination of existing “monolingual communication” orientations as an opposition force to interlingual communication.

Democratic Intercultural Communication

For the convenience of the discussion, let us define intercultural communication as follows: "Intercultural communication is any communication taking place between people whose mother tongues are different." In the free and democratic world, it is only natural and logical to expect that intercultural communication be democratic, just as one expects any interpersonal communication to be democratic. However, it is the language barrier, as the definition suggests, that makes intercultural communication difficult and uniquely differentiated from interpersonal communication in which language differences are not necessarily a major concern. Based on the definition, the primary concern of intercultural communication, especially in terms of democratizing it, is to be this language barrier, its management, and its minimization. Take, for example, an intercultural communication between an English-speaking American (U.S.A.) and a Japanese-speaking Japanese. Which language are they going to use, English or Japanese? It is almost definite that they use English, be it in speech or in writing, and be it in New York, Tokyo, or the South Pole for the reasons that I shall discuss later. From this example, a person is made to believe that English functions extremely well as a medium of intercultural communication. The important fact, however, is that this kind of intercultural communication is unfair, considering the fact that non-native speakers of English are forced to speak English which is a foreign language to them, while English-speaking people (hereafter ES people) enjoy the comfort of speaking their own native tongue.

The very idea of selecting a common language as a medium of intercultural communication, be it English or any other natural language, operates directly against the ideals of democracy. In the above-mentioned American vs. Japanese interaction, usually the decision to use English is frequently made without mutual agreement, and rather one-sidedly by the ES people. In this unilateral process of selecting a certain language as a common medium, mainly because of political, economic, and cultural dominance of that language, the fundamental ideas that compose democratic praxis are totally ignored. These fundamental concepts are choice, equality, and freedom in communication. In democratic intercultural communication one's right to communicate freely in a language of one's choice on an equal basis with the other ought to be guaranteed and protected, just as in any interpersonal communication. Three democratic ideas need to be incorporated into the actual interactions of intercultural communication so that the communicants' right to communicate will be protected and the linguistic barrier will be democratically minimized. Neglecting efforts to recognize the aspect of the linguistic barrier in intercultural communication and failure to realize the importance of democratization of intercultural communication will create linguistic inequality and discrimination, resulting in a

deprivation of the basic human right to communicate one's ideas and opinions.

Formulating Principles of Democratic
Intercultural Communication

Let us now direct our attention to the three fundamental concepts of democratic intercultural communication—choice, equality, and freedom—to discover exactly what functions each has to the formulation of the principles of democratic intercultural communication.

- (1) **Choice:** A person's right to use a language of his/her choice, be it his/her mother tongue or another language, should be maintained in any situation in intercultural communication. No one in any situation should be disadvantaged or discriminated against because of the languages s/he uses. No individuals, institutions or governments can force a language of their choices upon any other individuals, institutions, or governments in any circumstances. The choice of languages should be given the first priority, respected, and observed in any intercultural communication.
- (2) **Equality:** Linguistic and communicative equality in intercultural communication should never be interfered with by political powers, economic wealth, or cultural dominance. No one should be forced into an unequal and disadvantageous situation because of differences in languages in intercultural communication. Equality in terms of linguistic and communicative load should be maintained in intercultural communication. For example, in a situation where a person speaks his/her mother tongue, and the other speaks a foreign language, we have a case of inequality in terms of linguistic and communicative load. This type of intercultural communication is undesirable and should be avoided.
- (3) **Freedom:** Freedom to express or perceive any idea or information in any language should be granted to any person engaging in intercultural communication. Restriction, be it tacit or explicit, individual or social, should not be exercised upon his/her freedom to express or perceive the message in a language of his/her choice. Freedom to communicate verbally and nonverbally in a way unique to a person's own culture should be protected and respected.

The problem of the language barrier should be addressed on the basis of these three democratic principles so that sensitivity and careful consideration with respect to language problems will be reflected in the actual interactions of intercultural communication.

A person's right to communicate is another important matter interrelated with the three

fundamental points of democratic intercultural communication. Kato (1977) lists four rights of communication in interpersonal communication as follows:

1. The right to communicate }..... communicator's
2. The right not to communicate } alternatives
3. The right to be communicated to }..... communicatee's
4. The right not to be communicated to } alternatives

If these four rights of communication and the three fundamental principles of democratic intercultural communication are synthesized, then four rights of democratic intercultural communication will emerge as follows:

i and ii: The right *to communicate* and the right *to be communicated to* in a language of one's *choice* which allows one to communicate or to be communicated to on an *equal* basis with the other without being restricted in terms of *freely* expressing oneself or perceiving the other's message.

iii and iv: The right *not to communicate* and the right *not to be communicated to* in a *language forced upon oneself* which compels one to communicate or to be communicated to on a very *unequal* basis with the other, resulting in an enormous *restriction* upon one's freedom to express and perceive the message.

In order for intercultural communication to be fruitful and democratic, these four rights should be protected and encouraged. In particular, the first two positive rights (i and ii) should be protected, while the communication situations that force one to exercise the last two negative rights (iii and iv) should be eliminated from intercultural interaction.

Interlingual vs. Monolingual Communication

Kato (1977) presents some combinations of the four rights of communication in interpersonal communication to illustrate some conflict situations, as in Figure 1 below.

Communicator Communicatee	1. Right to communicate	2. Right not to communicate
3. Right to be communicated to	communication	"Leave me alone" "Tell me, tell me"
4. Right not to be communicated to	"He doesn't listen to me" "Shut up!"	No communication

Figure 1. Conflicts between four rights of communication

Kato maintains that combinations of 1 and 4, and 2 and 3 present conflicts of rights of communication, creating irritation, frustration, and dissatisfaction. In intercultural communication where people's native languages differ in the first place, the difficulties in these conflict situations will be enormously compounded, often resulting in misunderstanding and non-understanding, and even hostility. In other words, intercultural communication is conflict-prone. Therefore, the establishment of the four rights of democratic intercultural communication is very necessary, and it is also necessary to eliminate the intercultural communication situations that will create unnecessary conflict situations so that intercultural communication will be democratically practiced.

Let us consider two types of intercultural communication situations that involve different decisions as to the language choices as we attempt to discover which communication situations are protective of the four rights of democratic intercultural communication. The two types are (1) interlingual intercultural communication and (2) monolingual intercultural communication, each type having two variations according to different decisions concerning further language choices in communication. Interlingual intercultural communication is either (1) with mediation (hereafter "Interlingual Type 1") or (2) without mediation (hereafter "Interlingual Type 2"). Monolingual intercultural communication is either (1) through a third language (hereafter "Monolingual Type 1") or (2) through either one of the communicants' native languages (hereafter "Monolingual Type 2").

Let me describe and discuss each one of these four types of intercultural communication, and suggest in the discussion that interlingual communication will contribute to the alleviation of conflicts of rights of communication, broadening the foundation for democratic intercultural communication, while monolingual communication is prone to the generation of conflicts among these rights, resulting in undemocratic intercultural communication.

First, let us define what "interlingual" and "monolingual" mean, and then discuss the two variations of each type. "Interlingual communication" is a type of intercultural communication where different languages of one's choice serve as the medium of communication. "Monolingual communication" is a type of intercultural communication where only one language serves as the medium of communication.

Interlingual Type 1 is an interlingual communication by way of mediations such as translation and interpretation. If people of different languages wish to communicate, but have limited or almost no knowledge of each other's languages, they will seek assistance from other people who know both languages. In this type of communication, people can speak a language of their choice, namely their own native language. This will definitely establish the foundation for democratic intercultural dialogue in which choice, equality, and freedom in communication

are maximally protected. Also, in this type of communication, the possibility of generating conflicts between rights to communicate (i.e., 1 and 4, 2 and 3 in Figure 1) is limited because democratic principles are incorporated in this type of communication.

Interlingual Type 2 is an interlingual communication without the mediations such as translation and interpretation. This is possible only if people have a good command of foreign languages. Such people can engage in interlingual Type 2 communication if they communicate by *speaking their own language* while understanding by *listening to another person's language*. For example, when a Chinese who understands English and an American with the working knowledge of Chinese meet, they can communicate effectively while they speak Chinese and English respectively, and simultaneously understand each other by listening to the other's language.

Monolingual Type 1 is an intercultural communication which involves a third language that is neither a communicator's nor a communicatee's language. It takes place when both persons happen to use a common foreign language and agree to communicate in that third language as a medium of communication. For example, when a French and a Japanese agree to communicate in English, they will engage in this type of communication. The language choice is made on a mutual agreement basis, but differences in skills of the third language may cause some problems in terms of equality and freedom in communication. For example, an immigrant to the United States with ten years' residence and an immigrant who has just arrived are vastly different in terms of their communicative ability in English.

Monolingual Type 2 is an intercultural communication where either one of the native languages of the communicants is used as a medium of communication. It takes place, for example, when an American (U.S.A.) whose native language is American English and a Japanese, whose native language is Japanese, with the working knowledge of American English engage in communication in American English. As discussed above, this type of communication will cause problems, often resulting in an undemocratic intercultural communication. Language choice is often made not on a mutual agreement basis, but rather because of the cultural, political, and economic dominance of the chosen language. Concerning equality and freedom in communication, non-native speakers are enormously handicapped compared to the ease and comfort with which native speakers can communicate. Therefore, conflicts concerning rights of communication are highly likely to occur in this type of communication as a result of restriction on choice, equality, and freedom in communication. Besides, Monolingual Type 2 has a great likelihood of putting non-native speakers into a situation where their basic human rights to communicate are radically violated. I encountered a case in point to illustrate this at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in Illinois while I was doing the graduate study

during 1982–85. A Colombian student at the University who was robbed in the parking lot outside of a local bank sought help only in vain. Why? Because he could not make himself understood in English, according to the University-affiliated newspaper. If only there had been American citizens or police who could understand *his language!* In ironic contrast, the Japanese police who deal with drunk-driving Americans communicate in English. One cannot help thinking of the inseparability between the power structure of international politics and language choice in intercultural communication. And, it is in this Monolingual Type 2 communication that these power relations are grossly amplified, often to the great disadvantage of those whose culture is in a politically weak position.

A summary of the four intercultural communication situations in relation to the principles of democratic intercultural communication is presented in Figure 2 below.

Principles Types of Intercultural Communication	Choice	Equality	Freedom	Conflicts in Rights
Interlingual 1	+	+	+	– (least)
Interlingual 2	+	+	+	– (less)
Monolingual 1	+	–	–	+
Monolingual 2	–	–	–	+

Figure 2. Compatibility between four types of intercultural communication and principles of democratic intercultural communication.

Implications of Interlingual Communication

My analysis thus far suggests that interlingual communication that allows for the use of multiple languages is essential in terms of realizing democratic intercultural communication and avoiding conflicts between rights of communication. The interlingual intercultural communication with or without the mediation of a translator or interpreter contains an enormous advantage over monolingual practice in communication. The advantages are extensive and have significant implications. The interlingual intercultural communication will be (1) pluralistic, (2) politically neutral, (3) humanistic, and (4) educational. Let us discuss these merits one by one.

Interlingual Communication is Pluralistic.

Since interlingual communication is based upon democratic principles—choice, equality,

freedom, and protection of the rights of communication—it is very democratic in nature. In addition, such communication greatly contributes to promoting cultural and linguistic pluralism in the society. The number of languages that exist in the world amount at least to 3,000 (Fromkin & Rodman, 1974). Each and every one of these languages is an important treasure of each culture. No matter how small the actual number of speakers it may be or no matter how archaic the language may appear to be, it should be preserved and respected as an important cultural heritage of humankind. Interlingual communication contributes to this idea of linguistic equality and pluralism, while monolingual communication would force the minority languages into a disadvantageous and unprivileged status.

Interlingual Communication is Politically Neutral.

Interlingual communication is capable of minimizing political influence upon language choice because the principles make it very difficult for speakers of a politically, and therefore culturally dominant, language to exercise their dominance by controlling communication. With interlingual communication, all the languages are given an equal chance to be used, recognized, and respected, regardless of the political or cultural status of the language.

Interlingual Communication is Humanistic.

Perhaps the major criticism against interlingual communication is that it is time-consuming, inefficient, and costly because of the time spent for translations and interpretation. However, this seeming disadvantage is a source of humanistic communication. That is to say, communication with mediation of some sort slows down the whole process of communicative interaction with the result that the communicants have more time to ponder about, examine and ascertain the message than in the case of monolingual communication where both the communicator and the communicatee are forced to exchange the messages without careful thought. To allow for more time to think in communication would help develop the conditions for a more humanistic communication, especially in this dominantly fast-oriented age in which everything from eating and studying to loving and communicating is done quickly. Today people are conditioned to act fast, faster, and fastest! And yet, very few people seem to recognize that this is exactly what causes an inhumane and animalistic behavior among people. In other words, “fast” communication forces people to give signal reactions just like Pavlov’s dog which salivates at the sound of the bell. In these situations, people would react compulsively and respond only to the salient message while disregarding all the other information. As a result, a person’s response would lack logical coherence and individual perception fails to comprehend the total picture of what is going on in communication. Korzybski (1958) warns against fast communication. He advises that we should not strive too much for speed in mental activities, because to keep up speed would perpetuate the same patterns of thought, restricting the possibility of original and

creative thinking. Therefore, if we allow more time in communication, it will emancipate us from our habitual patterns of communication, thus helping us to communicate carefully, humanely, and effectively. The time-consuming nature of interlingual communication has a great potential for developing not only a careful, non-reactive, but also a creative and possibly emancipatory communication behavior.

Interlingual Communication is Educational.

Another advantage of interlingual communication is related to education, especially foreign language instruction. The promotion of interlingual communication will lead to the encouragement of studies of foreign languages and cultures for practical as well as intellectual purposes. Since interlingualism requires a large supply of translators and interpreters, it will give students of foreign languages a great opportunity to have a practical application of what they have learned to realistic, and possibly professional, situations in their future careers. Intellectually speaking, foreign language education gives students not only the knowledge and skills of another language, but more importantly it also opens their eyes to different cultures. Therefore, it is logical to propose that foreign language education should constitute a vital role of the studies of intercultural communication.

Considering the importance of foreign language education for the benefit of intercultural understanding, it is extremely deplorable that the United States should continue deemphasizing foreign language education and keep the “let-others-learn-English” attitude. Some statistics demonstrate this (Simon, 1980): (1) The United States is the only nation where you can graduate from college without a single year of foreign language learning; (2) It is possible to earn a Ph. D. without studying any foreign languages; (3) As of 1975, only ten percent of American universities have a foreign language requirement. And, the list goes on. It is no wonder that the United States should be labeled “the land of the monolingual” (Simon, 1980). As the leader of the democratic world, the United States should realize the enormous merit that foreign language education will provide and thus should promote foreign language education. Otherwise, the intercultural communication between a monolingual American with the limited perspective about the rest of the world and a non-English speaking person will continue to be directly opposed to the fundamental principles of democratic intercultural communication.

Two Resistances to Interlingual Communication

A great deal of resistance to the development of interlingual practices in intercultural communication is to be anticipated from the monolingual force represented by the following two movements: (1) the constructed language movement and (2) the English as a universal

language movement. Let us discuss each one as we reveal the inappropriateness of these two movements for the development of democratic intercultural communication.

First, the constructed language movement represented by constructed natural languages such as Esperanto, was initiated to establish an artificial language as a medium of universal communication. Although the advantages were recognized (Sapir, 1931) and Esperanto in particular received some degree of international acceptance (Tonkin, 1979), the very concept of having a constructed natural language is highly questionable. The primary objective of a constructed language movement to eliminate cultural bias of a dominant language in order to establish a neutral language is destroyed by asking “who makes it?” Esperanto, constructed by a Polish person is heavily European with its use of the Roman alphabet and lexical and syntactic characteristics of some Western languages. The nature and functional characteristics of a constructed language are totally dependent upon who makes that language, and the question of who does that job is often subjected to the political power relationships among the nations. Besides, no constructed language could escape the cultural influence of those who construct them.

The second monolingual force is that of English as a universal language which has been gaining a widespread use, acceptance, and prestige across the world, especially after World War II. This advocacy is represented by the following two populations: (1) English-speaking population or the ES population, i.e., native speakers of English; (2) Non-native English-speaking population or the NNES population, i.e., people who learned English as a second language and communicate in English.

Monolingual ES Culture. The practice of English as a universal language is potentially capable of destroying democratic principles of intercultural communication not only because of its monolingual nature, but also because of its imperialistic and discriminatory characteristics. It is imperialistic considering the historical background of ES culture, politics, and religion. It is a historical fact that the dissemination of European languages was accompanied by European imperialism, which was more recently taken over by ES cultures such as American (U.S.A.) political, military, and economic dominance. Amidst this, the United Nations has simply become “another arena for Anglo-Saxon diplomatic manouvres” (Mazrui, 1975, p. 22) and “heavily tilted on the side of an English-speaking leadership” (Mazrui, 1975, p. 22). Mencken’s famous remark, “If English is enough for Jesus, it is enough for me,” reflects an imperialistic self-aggrandizement. An American Christian minister’s glorification of English as “the carrier of Christian ideas and as the medium of Anglo-Saxonizing mankind” (Mazrui, 1975, p. 202) presents an example of global hegemony of the ES culture.

Because of these imperialistic orientations, English as a universal language is bound to be discriminatory. It is the language of the ruler and conquerer in the colonized areas of the world, symbolizing power, wealth, and social and cultural prestige, while putting all the non-ES population into a sub-human class. English has become an index of social discrimination between the “haves” and the “have nots”, a marker between the rich and the poor, the privileged and the underprivileged. In the United States, the immigrants without the skills of English virtually drop into the lowest rank of the society. In the Asian and African countries that used to be the ES colonies, the division of social classes is closely associated with whether or not one speaks English (Mazrui, 1975). Also, by way of different forms of mass media such as movies, radio, and TV, the ES culture continues to disseminate the image of power and wealth across the world, in an attempt to make itself the best referent culture for the rest of the world. It is ironic that American TV is filled with commercials calling for the salvation of the hungry and the dying in the Third World, when, in fact, it is mostly because of political manipulation by the ES culture that hunger and death in these parts of the world are created. The ES people should be reminded that the earth could support only 500 million people at the United States’ standard of living (Darrow & Palmquist, 1977, p. 45).

The NNES Culture. With the increase of NNES population, English is increasingly accepted as a medium for universal communication. Today, there is a growing acceptance of localized forms of English throughout the world for the benefit of efficient international communication (Smith, 1981). That is to say, various “Englishes” spoken by the NNES population is beginning to receive formal recognition and acceptance. This seems to be a step forward compared to the days when all “Englishes” with a colonial accent were disrespected as “funny” and “uneducated.” However, this is actually a big step backward in terms of promoting democratic intercultural communication.

Even though various forms of English are being accepted, this will create a monolingual situation because it is only the English language that is used in this type of communication. So it will cause a violation of the principles of democratic intercultural communication. Actually, the ES culture’s proposal for accepting NNES English is a cleverly disguised form of its imperialistic aggression. In the face of rising nationalism in the developing countries, the ES culture starts an indirect language control of these countries by establishing an NNES government, instead of direct cultural imposition upon them. Such an NNES population causes many problems that impede the development of democratic intercultural interlingual communication.

First of all, the NNES population often constitutes the ruling and superior class in their

country, clearly separating itself from the non–NNES population. While the NNES population can engage in international communication with the ES culture, they cannot or are unwilling to communicate with the non–NNES fellow citizens, making it impossible to have intranational communication. Iran ruled by the Shah is a recent case in point to illustrate the point. The NNES population is exactly the same as the ES imperialists in that they enjoy the exclusive power and wealth, and never share them with the majority of their fellow citizens.

Because of the very fact that they can communicate in English, the NNES people also give the ES people a great number of illusions and misconceptions about the non–ES world. The NNES people’s linguistic accommodation works nicely with the ES people’s superiority complex. As a result, the ES people are led to believe as naively as a boy in *Huckleberry Finn* that all men speak English, never realizing that they are only exposed to limited channels of communication. The world view these ES people formulate on the basis of these limited communication experiences will be very narrow and biased. Therefore, the ES monolinguals are bound to misperceive other cultures. And if the misconceptions are escalated, the ES monolinguals will even believe that all the people will eventually act their (ES) way! The ES people’s lack of experience in having an interlingual dialogue with the non–ES people seriously bars them from appreciating other cultures, and at the same time the NNES people’s singleminded linguistic accommodation only amplifies the ES people’s superiority complex and keeps them away from learning about other cultures. It is about time that the NNES people stopped using English and started engaging in interlingual communication with the ES people. That will be a good beginning point where the ES people will start realizing that all languages and cultures are created equal as a matter of human practice.

Conclusion

Intercultural communication, if it is to be democratic, should be interlingual, not monolingual. Interlingual communication promotes a respect for each other’s languages, minimizing politically–based rankings among languages. Interlingual communication protects the three fundamentals of democratic intercultural communication and the individuals’ rights of communication. The democratic nature of interlingual communication will lead to a politically neutral foundation for language choice in intercultural communication. Also, it is humanistic in that the mediation of translation and interpretation slows down the process of communication, resulting in a more careful communication. In addition, interlingual communication necessitates the promotion of foreign language education, inviting a great many people to learn foreign languages.

Major opposition can be anticipated from the ES and the NNES populations who enjoy power and superiority today. The idea of having interlingual communication is very effective in terms of sensitizing and modifying these people's attitude toward language choice in intercultural communication. It is also helpful in terms of reexamining the monolingual orientation of a universal language concept.

As suggestions for the future research, I would hope that more attention will be paid to the problem of language choice so that the theoretical discussion concerning language choice in intercultural communication will be conducted. Also, empirical research that investigates the problems of language choice is necessary. The research, both theoretical and empirical, that addresses the problems of linguistic inequality and linguistic discrimination is urgently needed.

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