



Title	LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION AND THE RIGHT TO LANGUAGE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
Author(s)	Tsuda, Yukio
Citation	経済学部研究年報, 4, pp.71-83; 1988
Issue Date	1988-02
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/26124">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/26124</a>
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## LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION AND THE RIGHT TO LANGUAGE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION\*

Yukio Tsuda

The purpose of this paper is to critically explore language discrimination in intercultural communication in order to understand the nature of the problem, and at the same time, bring to our consciousness the importance of the right to language. More specifically, I shall first describe some cases of language discrimination that are taking place in intercultural communication today, then discuss the importance of language to human existence in order to critically realize how threatening language discrimination is to human beings, and finally, make some suggestions for the formulation of language policies that will promote the right to language in intercultural communication.

### Language Discrimination

The concepts of "racial discrimination" and "sexual discrimination" are familiar to all of us, have been very much discussed, and various actions and policies have been formulated to deal with these two forms of discrimination. Language discrimination, however, escapes most people's attention, despite the fact that "discrimination on grounds of language is a reality" (Tonkin, 1979, p. 25). That language discrimination does not receive much attention does not mean that it is not an important issue. Rather, it implies the complex nature of language discrimination. Language entails complexity in that it has a direct bearing on the preconscious of human beings. Also, language entails complexity in that it has a direct bearing on the process of human communication. Language is the most fundamental factor that characterizes human beings, the more fundamental characteristic than the empirical factors such as "gender" and "the color of the skin" that characterize sexual and racial discrimination. The importance of language to human existence is implicitly implied in Decarte's famous remark, "I think, therefore I am," because thought and consciousness are made possible by human

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\* This paper is a revised version of the paper presented at International Conference on Cross-cultural Communication: East and West held at Seoul, Korea, in August 1985.

language. Therefore, language discrimination entails universal significance directly related to the existential conditions of human beings, whereas sexual and racial discrimination, though they are equally serious matters, entail less universal and more particularistic significance, as seen in the slogans such as "Equality for women" and "Black is beautiful." In other words, these two forms of discrimination cannot be sufficiently dealt with unless language discrimination is explicitly recognized.

I would like to introduce some cases of language discrimination in intercultural communication in order to illustrate exactly what language discrimination is about. It can be said that language discrimination takes place at any level or aspect of intercultural activities including politics, education, science, economy, and mass media. First, in international politics, people of minority language are faced with various forms of language discrimination in the United Nations. "Even at a liberal estimate, forty percent of the Member States, thirty percent of the United Nations' population, are still denied the use of their own languages" (Harry and Mandell, 1979, p. 21). The relay interpretations and translations prevent minority language groups from giving prompt response and having accurate comprehension (Harry and Mandell, 1979, p. 11). Also, the cost of translation and interpretation is not equally shared: "At the United Nations, Japan, Brazil, and Indonesia pay their contributions to the language services like everyone else, even though they are paying for translations out of one language foreign to them into another language equally foreign" (Tonkin and Edwards, 1981, p. 95). The International Whaling Committee has acknowledged only English as its official language since its inception in 1946. The non-English-speaking member states are responsible for the cost of translation. In the Committee, due to the exclusive use of English, non-English-speaking states are often barred from fully comprehending the proceedings of the meeting. A noted marine biologist who observed a 1979 meeting witnessed a confusion in which the French and Mexican representatives, not comprehending the proceedings conducted in English, voted to approve the motion, when in fact their decisions were the opposite (Futatsugi, 1981, pp. 34-35).

Second, in education, as a result of dominance of a few Western languages around the world, especially English, language discrimination emerges in the form of extra burden of learning foreign languages on the part of people of non-western languages. For example, in the Phillipines, where 87 different languages are spoken, about half of the course credits in a four-year university curriculum are dedicated to learning languages such as Tagalog and English (Hirano, 1979, p. 29). Likewise, in India, children usually have to learn three languages; the language of the state, Hindi, and Eng-

lish, all of them in different scripts. Too much time is spent on language learning, and too little time on the substance, so that "they are being miseducated" (Goldthorpe, 1975, p. 191).

On a worldwide scale, the dominance of English in education is clear. Seventy-six percent of all secondary school students in the non-English world, excluding China, are studying English (Tonkin and Edwards, 1981, p. 95). In Western Europe, a high percentage of learning English as a second language is evident: of all the people who are learning another language, 98% of the West Germans, 90% of the Dutch, 81% of the French, and 56% of the Italians learn English as a second language (Tonkin and Edwards, 1981, p. 95). Learning English is obviously a great pressure and burden upon the non-English-speaking population of the world, thus imposing discrimination upon these people.

The same phenomenon is taking place in the realm of science. That is, the dominance of a few Western languages prevents the scientists of non-Western languages from fully participating and being recognized in the international scientific community. Some examples illustrate this point.

1) A Japanese anthropologist expressed his dissatisfaction with an international conference of anthropologists held in Chicago, saying that it was a Western-language-biased conference because the translations were available only for English, German, French, Russian and Spanish (Hirano, 1979, p. 46).

2) The Czech chemist Novobilsky reported on an international chemistry conference where the American (U. S. A.) scientists dominated the lecture and question-and-answer sessions, and often got their viewpoints accepted mainly due to their greater mastery of English (Sherwood, 1983).

3) Sherwood (1979) maintains that success in international science today is conditioned by the ability to speak and write English. He believes that this is especially disadvantageous to young scientists in the Third World, except for the former British colonies.

4) George A. Maul, an editor for a scientific journal, gives an account of his experience of rejecting a research paper written in English by a non-English-speaking scholar for the reason that the English was not good enough. He admits, "we are guilty of language discrimination whenever a communications barrier favoring a particular national language is constructed" (Maul, 1983, p. 2).

5) Tonkin (1979) maintains that even the best scientist of a country will be linguistically and rhetorically outclassed by native speakers of English in international

conferences. He also points out the fact that the developing country must adjust itself to the language of the owner of the technology, English in most cases. This will accelerate the dominance of English and submission of other languages.

In terms of economy, language is equivalent to money. Speakers of Western languages, especially English, reportedly gain more income than speakers of other languages. For example, in Quebec, Canada, speakers of English earn more than speakers of French (Vaillancourt, 1979). Also, the dominance of colonial languages in Asia and Africa has generated social divisions in these regions. A report tells that in Hong Kong, speakers of English are considered the first-class citizens, while speakers of Chinese, the second-class (Hirano, 1979, pp. 65-67).

In addition, the non-English-speaking people seem to have a great difficulty getting their opinions heard and recognized by the rest of the world, while the English-speaking people have more access to the channels of world communications, not because of the excellent ideas they have, but mainly because the world media are monopolized by the United States and the United Kingdom. This inequality allows the English-speaking people to overly inflate their ego and intentionally ignore the opinions and activities of people of other languages. For example, actress Jane Fonda, in meeting with Japanese anti-Vietnam war activists in the 1970s, was reportedly "enraged" to find that most Japanese activists did not speak or understand English, and said, "The meeting is meaningless" (Futatsugi, 1981, p. 11). She is ignorant of the fact that her existence was meaningless.

The list goes endlessly, and it means that language discrimination in intercultural communication is extremely widespread. Indeed discrimination on grounds of language is a reality. But this reality is very difficult to grasp, because discrimination occurs mainly at the level of the preconscious, the conceptual and the symbolic, unlike the sexual and racial discriminations, where the basis for discrimination is more obvious and empirical. Also, unlike the sexual and racial discriminations, language discrimination involves communicative paradox. That is to say, the oppressed cannot possibly communicate about the communication problem that confronts them, because they are deprived of their own languages. Communicating in their own languages will isolate them from the rest of the world and result in communicating against themselves. The other side of the coin is that if the oppressed of language discrimination start communicating in one of the dominant Western languages, they would either be outclassed rhetorically by native speakers or find themselves in an irony of contradicting their argument by being able to communicate in a dominant language and legitimizing the

very structure of communication that reproduces and justifies language discrimination. Unfortunately, that is exactly what I am doing at this moment. By using the English language, the most dominant language, I am legitimizing and reifying the unfair language practices of intercultural communication which cause discrimination and justify unequal power relationships among people of different languages. That is, I am trapped in the double-bind from which I have no escape. I cannot have choice-making in this paradoxical double-bind communication, and it means that self-determination is impossible for the people of non-Western minority languages. As a result, severe existential crisis and psychological distortions are often caused in the minds of the oppressed, and dominant languages reside in their minds as the "inner foreign territory."

### The Right to Language

Let us examine the importance of language as it relates to various dimensions of human existence.

The inseparability of language and culture has been recognized by many anthropologists and linguists. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, for example, suggests that the linguistic structure is projected into a cultural way of thought (Whorf, 1941). Also, language is not only "a necessary condition for culture, it is itself a part of culture" (Greenberg, 1971, p. 156). Language is "the product of culture, reflecting basic human needs" (Bretton, 1976, p. 446); it is also an intricate part of culture (Baxter, 1983). More important, language forms a person's way of life, self-worth, and cultural identity. In the words of Colin Cherry:

A person's language forms a major part of his own identity, of how he sees himself in relation to his friends, colleagues, fellow countrymen and foreigners. It is one source of his pride and self-respect (Cherry, 1971, p. 16).

This suggests how traumatic it is to be denied the use of a person's own language. The denial of a person's own language is the denial of his/her existence.

Language is also an important indicator of social relationships. Fishman (1971) argues that language is not merely a means nor a carrier of content, but defines it as follows:

Language itself is content, a referent for loyalties and animosities, an indicator of social statuses and personal relationships, a marker of situations and topics as well as of the societal goals and the large-scale value-laden arenas of interaction that typify every speech community (p. 219).

That is to say, language is both the form and substance of a person's existence. Name-

ly, you are what you speak.

In addition to its cultural and social connections, language serves as a political tool. Defining language as a means of control, Leibowitz (1976) argues that: "When politics and language relate most openly, we can see more clearly the use of language as a means of expressing power, as a way of controlling and manipulating people in society" (pp. 449-450). He further argues that if language is imposed from outside, it would be threatening and forbidding to a people. Likewise, Bretton (1976) believes that the political manipulation of language preserves power and security of a certain group of people while it may lead to the exclusion of other people from the social communication.

This brings us to the discussion of the relationship between language and power, and language and social class. Bernstein (1971) argues that the linguistic codes one uses are an expression of social relations and classes by formulating the theory of 'restricted codes' and 'elaborated codes.' His argument follows that the working-class speech is associated with restricted codes which are more limited in syntactic and lexical variation and more implicit in semantics, whereas the middle-class speech is associated with elaborated codes which are characterized by a wider range of repertoire in syntax and vocabulary, and by a more explicit articulation of messages and a more logical construction of ideas. Based on this theory, Mueller (1973) conceptualizes the notion of "distorted communication" which is defined as "all forms of restricted and prejudiced communication that by their nature inhibit a full discussion of problems, issues, and ideas that have public relevance" (p. 19). He points out that the restricted code of the lower-class people prevents them from fully articulating their ideas and adequately understanding what is taking place in political and social communication. In order to maintain their power and dominance, the ruling class blocks the lower-class people from acquiring the elaborated code by controlling the opportunity for education and employment. From the viewpoint of Critical Theory, Habermas maintains that 1) language operates as a metainstitution, 2) language is a medium of power and domination, and 3) language is an ideology (McCarthy, 1978, p. 183), so that language functions to legitimize the dominance of the ruling class, and justifies the reproduction of inequality and discrimination. Based on these ideas of Bernstein, Mueller, and Habermas, I have presented an analysis of unequal language practices in intercultural communication and provided a name for such practices as "distorted intercultural communication" (Tsuda, 1985; Tsuda; 1986) In fact, distorted intercultural communication is another name for language discrimination.

All these studies concerning language indicate not only the importance of language to human existence, but also show how languages are manipulated to justify and maintain the unequal power structure that exists in society. No doubt, all these scholars and specialists of communication consciously or subconsciously wish for the realization of linguistic equality, preservation of minority languages, and freedom from language discrimination. In matters of fact, many efforts have been made to fulfill this wish by international politics. There have been many international agreements and declarations that stipulate the equality regardless of language differences. Among these are *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, *The Charter of the United Nations*, *The International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights*, *The Helsinki Agreement at Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe*, and *The Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies* (McDougal et al., 1976). All these international agreements endeavor to promote a democratic practice of intercultural communication which protects the basic human rights including the right to language and communication. Specifically, they attempt to advance the following :

1. the right and freedom to use language(s) of one's choice in intercultural communication.
2. the freedom to communicate without social, economic, or political manipulation and discrimination in intercultural communication, and
3. the acknowledgement of equal importance of each cultural (or national) language in intercultural communication.

The problem is that in actual interactions of intercultural communication, these declarations and agreements are not observed, but ignored and violated continuously, as many cases of language discrimination suggest. We have to be aware of this discrepancy between principle and practice. The critique of the existing practices hopefully narrows the gap between principle and practice.

#### Toward a Democratic Language Policy in Intercultural Communication<sup>1)</sup>

Language discrimination takes place where monolingualism is in effect in intercultural communication, favoring the people of dominant languages at the expense of the right to language of the socially dominated people. Monolingual intercultural communication is a product of linguistic imperialism and ethnocentrism. Pidgin English, for example, is a product of monolingual intercultural communication which the British or American invaders imposed upon the Asians. In order to reduce communicative inequality, various forms of linguistic accommodation including bilingualism, multilin-



gualism, the use of translation and interpretation are commonly practiced. While the active use and equal recognition of different languages are effective in terms of protecting minority languages and promoting respect for different languages, the simultaneous use of many languages makes it very difficult to have effective communication, even if excellent translation or interpretation may be provided. Translation and interpretation not only cause enormous expenses, but also become the source of misunderstanding and frustration among the people, as I have discussed earlier in this paper. Moreover, translation involves a potential danger of creating an enormous intercultural misunderstanding. Misinterpretation of a Japanese word "mokusatsu" used by the Japanese prime minister in response to the Potsdam Proclamation issued by the Allied Forces toward the end of World War II is considered to be one of the reasons for the American president to decide to drop atomic bombs upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Coughlin, 1953). It is nonsensical to blame translators, and we have to realize that the people of different languages live in different syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic realities, which imply the impossibility of accurate translation.

Monolingual intercultural communication causes language discrimination and linguistic pluralism causes confusion in communication. In the face of this difficult intercultural linguistic environment, what alternative approaches will possibly realize communicative equality free from language discrimination? I shall make some reference to two possibilities to be taken into consideration. One is what I call "neutrolingual intercultural communication." This is a type of intercultural communication in which a language other than those of the people concerned is used as a common medium of communication. For example, if a person of language A communicates with a person of language B in language C, they engage in "neutrolingual communication," implying that the chosen language is culturally and politically neutral. Actually, this practice was implemented in past international diplomacy. In 1930, when China and the U. S. A. signed the Treaty of Arbitration, they produced its text in Chinese, English, and French, and agreed in article IV of the Treaty that "in case of divergence the French text shall prevail" (*Treaties and other international agreements of the United States of America: 1776-1949*, 1971, p. 725). The whole point of neutrolingual communication is to neutralize the power imbalance between the people of different languages by adopting a third language culturally neutral to both parties, who thus become equally handicapped to use a foreign language. However, the use of former colonial languages should be avoided, because these languages are far from neutral and usually maintain cultural and symbolic dominance in the colonized societies, thus preventing equality in commu-

nication.

Another alternative form of intercultural communication is what I call "interlingual intercultural communication" in which a constructed intercultural auxiliary language serves as a common medium of communication. Such a common language, or usually called 'interlanguage,' has evolved from the study called 'Interlinguistics' or "the study of linguistic elements necessary to the formation of a constructed international language" (Tonkin, 1977, p. 8). It has a long history, dating back to several hundred years, but it is at the beginning of the Twentieth Century when noted linguists such as Otto Jespersen and Edward Sapir took serious interest in the creation of a constructed international language that interlinguistics became a recognized field of study. Jespersen (1928) insists that a common language for international communication should be 1) artificial (or constructed), 2) international, and 3) auxiliary. He believes that a constructed interlanguage is as natural as a national language, and that it would "not infringe upon the sacred rights of the mother-tongue" (p. 12). Sapir (1931) follows Jespersen's idea and promotes the idea of a constructed international auxiliary language. He believes that a constructed language is logically superior to a natural (or national) language, and does not give any psychological anxiety to the learners as a natural language often does.

If interlingual communication is actually put into practice, it will greatly contribute to the realization of a democratic intercultural communication. The supplementary nature of the common language protects the right to language and communication. Equality will be maintained among the speakers, though there may be some differences in skills. Cultural, social, and political neutrality will be established because the common language does not belong to anyone. In terms of language-learning burden, the common constructed language creates equality because everyone has to learn it.

Sapir (1931) argues that such a common constructed language should be "as simple, as regular, as logical, as rich, and as creative as possible" (p. 113). Esperanto, a constructed language created by a Polish medical doctor L. L. Zamenhof in the late 19th Century, probably best fulfills these requirements. Its easiness, regularity and logical characteristics have been evidenced (Tonkin, 1979; Sherwood & Sherwood, 1982). Also, its richness and creativeness have been demonstrated by an enormous amount of translation works in Esperanto that range from the Bible, the works of literature, to the works of science and technology. The Universal Esperanto Association has established a close affiliation with the UNESCO, and it has been reportedly told that its speakers now amount to more than one million in the world (Wood, 1979). Actually,

scientists from many disciplines have recognized its viability as a common medium of communication and have recommended its requirement in the Ph. D. program and for titles and abstracts in journals (Maul, 1983). Esperanto is equally easy for Europeans as well as for Asians and Africans. Therefore, its proficiency can be acquired in one-fifth of the time usually spent learning a European language.

I stay away from making an explicit proposal because the purpose of this paper is not to come up with a solution, but to attempt to come to grips with the problem and to bring it to our awareness. I am not sure if I have fulfilled that purpose sufficiently, but I am confident that I have made a small step forward.

By way of conclusion, I would like to introduce an idea by a German Critical Theorist, Jurgen Habermas, in regard to the interests involved in the sciences. According to Habermas (1968/1972); different scientific activities are motivated by different interests. He believes that the natural sciences are motivated by technical interests. In the context of communication, the natural scientists would be happy if the machines such as TV, radio, and satellites are working properly. Also, the historical/hermeneutic sciences are motivated by practical interests, according to him. Therefore, most social scientists would be satisfied if the present social system is preserved in order and control. Habermas urges the human scientists to go beyond these two interests and engage in critical sciences based on emancipatory interests. We, the human scientists, who study language and communication, should not be contented until emancipation of people from domination and discrimination is realized. In other words, we should continue to make a critical diagnosis of human communication in order to pursue truth, justice, and freedom.

#### NOTE

- 1) Some of this section's ideas have developed out of my paper, "Democratization of language choice in intercultural communication." (1986) *Annual Review of Economics*, A publication of Faculty of Economics, Nagasaki University, Vol. 2, 69-82.

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