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## Peace, Conflict, and War: The Role of Language and Languages

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Language makes us human. Whatever we do, language is central to our lives, and the use of language underpins the study of every other discipline. Understanding language gives us insight into ourselves and a tool for the investigation of the rest of the universe. Proposing marriage, opposing globalization, composing a speech, all require the use of language; to buy a meal or sell a car involves communication, which is made possible by language; to be without language — as an infant, a foreigner or a stroke victim — is to be at a devastating disadvantage. Martians and dolphins, bonobos and bees, may be just as intelligent, cute, adept at social organization, and morally worthwhile, but they do not share our language, they do not speak “human” (Smith, 2002, p. 3).

The leading linguist of the 20th century, Noam Chomsky (1972), once commented that, “When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the ‘human essence’, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man” (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003, p. 3). If language is unique to humanity, conflict is most certainly not. War is perhaps uniquely human (though there is evidence that chimpanzees also engage in war-like behavior), but this is certainly nothing to boast about. If we are more successfully war-like than other species, this is due to our mastery of the technology rather than to any particular cognitive, let alone moral superiority. In fact, war is an especially puzzling part of the human experience. As Dale Copeland has argued, “Since Thucydides, the puzzle of major war has been one of the most important but intractable questions in the study of international relations” (2000, p. 1) — and not simply international relations, but in trying to understand human beings more generally.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the complex relationships among peace, conflict, and war on the one hand, and language and language diversity on the other. Although these relationships are important, the fundamental argument presented here will be that, in spite of many historical and contemporary claiming the contrary, linguistic differences are not causally related to other kinds of conflict, but other kinds of conflict are often manifested in linguistic conflict.

Diversity is a core characteristic of the human experience, as virtually any introductory anthropology textbook will suggest (e.g., Kottak, 2014; Muckle & Lubelle de González, 2016). We differ in a wide host of ways; human beings live in radically different kinds of societies: embodying an array of political and economic systems, structuring their families and kinship systems in almost countless manners, socializing and educating their children in an incredibly mix of different ways, practicing a wide assortment of religions and spiritual systems, utilizing multitudinous kinds of technology of varying degrees of sophistication, dressing themselves in a plentiful range of different garments and apparel, surviving in virtually all of the many climates on the planet, and otherwise coping with meeting their daily needs in a variety of ways. We also use an extensive number of languages, which vary in an incredible abundance of ways (e.g., McGregor, 2015; Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen & Spencer, 2009; Yule, 2017). Nor, it is important to keep in mind, are either human culture or human language ever static; both are in a perpetual process of change. As David Pharies has commented:

“Human culture is constantly changing in every way: in the way people dress or wear their hair; in the technologies they use; in their political, religious, and educational institutions; in the way they treat children and animals; in what and how much they eat; in the way the sexes relate to each other. Language can be characterized as the ultimate manifestation of human culture. It represents the foundation, in practical terms, of all other cultural elements, since it is the instrument through which is conveyed the entire body of knowledge that constitutes our customs, laws, and concept of human life. Perhaps because language is so omnipresent in our lives, the subtle yet infinite series of changes that it undergoes are sometimes difficult to perceive.” (2007, p. 1)

Most linguists estimate that there are somewhere between 6500 and 7000 languages currently spoken on our world.<sup>1</sup> Although certainly an impressive number, such estimates take into account only a tiny percentage of the total

number of human languages that must have existed since *homo sapiens* — or, more technically accurate, *homo sapiens sapiens* — first emerged as a distinctive species at some point around 250,000 years ago, when all of the modern populations of human beings diverged from a common ancestor, a time known as the “Mitochondrial Eve.” Human beings, for most of our existence as a species, have lived in extremely small groups, making the probability for the existence of an extremely large number of different languages quite high (Barnard, 2016, p. 5). One estimate, for instance, has suggested that as recently as 8000 BCE, there were around 20,000 different languages spoken by human beings. As James Hurford has suggested:

“It is likely that in prehistory, even though the human population was much smaller, the number of languages was greater. The number of different languages that have ever existed is far greater than the number we can count now. To grasp this, we have to abandon the notion of global languages like English, Chinese, and Arabic, spoken by millions.” (2014, p. 16)

There is a great deal that we do not know, and will never know, about the origins of human language. We do not know when language first began to be used by our ancestors, nor do we know where it first emerged, or whether it began as a common, single, proto-language somewhere and then spread or if, instead, it started as a number of distinct languages used by different groups in different locations — comparable to parallel evolution in. We do not know whether language emerged suddenly in a more or less complete linguistic form such as the languages that exist today — referred to as the “discontinuity hypothesis” — or whether it was the result of a much longer process of evolution and development — known as the “continuity hypothesis.” Although some anthropological linguists have argued that what we could consider “human language” to have emerged far earlier (Barnard, 2016, pp. 35–37), most linguists believe that while our ancestors had the cognitive and physiological capacity for language earlier, they only began using what we would call “language” around 100,000–50,000 years ago, which is admittedly quite a range. Even this extremely conservative estimate suggests that, given rates of normal language change, there have been tens of thousands of distinct human languages in our prehistory. To be sure, this is speculation since for most of our existence as a species, there are no records of any type of the languages used by human beings.

The first documented human languages date back some five thousand years to Mesopotamia, where we first have written records of Sumerian,

an isolated language containing elements of which were maintained in a complex linguistic and cultural bilingual symbiosis, which later developed as the Akkadians gradually replaced the Sumerians as a leading imperial power (Cooper, 1973; Edzard, 2003; Gianto, 1999; Huehnergard, 2011; Michalowski, 1996). Parts of the Gilgamesh epic cycle first appear in Sumerian, although the more complete version is found in Akkadian. Akkadian was an East Semitic language, linguistically unrelated to Sumerian but written in the same cuneiform script and with heavy borrowings from Sumerian.<sup>2</sup> Akkadian, in turn, was gradually replaced by Assyrian, which functioned as a lingua franca throughout much of the ancient Near East, declining as first Aramaic, and later koine Greek, the primary language of the New Testament, took over this function (Siegel, 2009). My point in reciting this history of early Mesopotamian languages is simply that language diversity, coupled with both social and individual bilingualism, and even multilingualism, has long been characteristic of human societies. Societies such as that of the United States and, indeed, most Anglophone societies, in which one language overwhelmingly dominates linguistic communication and in which both individual and social monolingualism are considered to be the norm, are in fact extremely atypical in the human experience.

In considering language and language diversity, it has been suggested that the use of different languages is frequently the cause of conflict between different groups. Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost, for instance, has commented that “[t]he idea of language, in part, and especially of language in conflict, resides in a complexity of relationships between self-identification group cohesion and world-view” (2003, p. 9). One example of this can be seen in the case of Lazar Ludwig Zamenhof, who grew up in the town of Bialystok, which was then in the part of Poland that was under the control of the Russian Empire (see Garvía, 2015, pp. 60–64; Korzhenkov, 2010; Okrent, 2009, pp. 94–95; Schor, 2016). Zamenhof witnessed, firsthand, the tensions and conflicts between the different groups who lived in Bialystok. As he explained in a letter to Nikolai Borovko in 1895:

“In Bialystok the population consisted of four different elements: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews. Each of these elements spoke a separate language and had hostile relations with the other elements. In that city, more than anywhere, a sensitive person might feel the heavy sadness of the diversity of languages and become convinced at every step that it is the only, or at least the primary force

which divides the human family into enemy parts.” (Okrent, 2009, pp. 94–95)

Zamenhof’s solution to the conflict between ethnic, national, and linguistic groups was the creation of a language that would be politically and ethically neutral, and it was this motivation that led to the creation of the international auxiliary language Esperanto (see Janton, 1993; Nuessel, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Zamenhof was absolutely correct in his observations about the conflicts and tensions between and among the different groups in Bialystok and, indeed, throughout the Pale of Settlement — the area in which Jews were allowed to live and outside of which they were generally forbidden to live on anything but a temporary basis — but his solution has not proven to be a particularly successful one.<sup>4</sup>

Language diversity has typically been related to several other social, political, and economic features that have important implications here. The first of these tendencies is that of language contact and, as a consequence, language dominance. Although not universal, most often, a conquering or ruling group imposes its language on those whom it has conquered or over whom it rules. Sometimes this takes place informally, while in others, it is the result of a deliberate policy. It often results in language shift, as well as phonological, morphological, and syntactic changes in all of the languages involved — although most obviously in lexical changes (Bybee, 2015). Such changes are frequently the result of the development of social and individual bilingualism and multilingualism in the short and medium terms, and not only language change but also language replacement; language emergence, as in cases of creolization; and language endangerment and death in the longer run (e.g., Austin & Sallabank, 2012; Evans, 2010; Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Hagège, 2000; Jones, 2015; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Thomason, 2015). In the contemporary era, two phenomena have become increasingly serious. The first of these phenomena is the growing dominance of a small number of Languages of Wider Communication (LWCs), and especially of English, in the world. The hegemony of English as a world language is largely unmatched in human history. Whether we are talking about diplomacy, commerce, scientific publications and presentations, entertainment, newspaper publishing, communication on the Internet, or pop culture, the English language plays the central role on the world stage — leading, of course, to very reasonable concerns about linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, 1997, 2006, 2008, 2009). The second phenomenon of the modern era is the growing threat of language endangerment or language death. Michael Krauss (1992) has

suggested that within the next 150 years, only somewhere between 300 and 600 of the languages currently used in the world will remain, a loss in the neighborhood of some 90% of the present 6500 languages (Evans, 2010; Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Hagège, 2000; Jones, 2015; Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

The dominance of particular languages in different societies commonly leads to linguistic inequality. Although it is certainly possible to imagine a human society in which two (or more) languages coexist on a basis of equality in all domains, such societies have been rare. The sociolinguistic norm in linguistically diverse societies entails the development of diglossic situations in which two language varieties are present in a single language community.<sup>5</sup> In such societies, one of the varieties is usually the L (low) linguistic variety, which is used as the daily vernacular language, and the H (high) variety, which is used in specific settings, such as literature, education, government, and so on. Even in monolingual societies, there are different varieties of the common language, and the varieties are virtually never perceived to be (or treated as) equal linguistic varieties; one's language or language variety is closely tied not only to identity but even more to status and power (Trudgill, 2016; Wardhaugh, 1999; for the specific case of the United States, see Lippi-Green, 2012). As the country song "Good Ole Boys Like Me" by Don Williams first released in 1979, it suggested that part of success in modern America is learning "to talk like the man on the six o'clock news."

Not only are different linguistic varieties tied to different kinds of identity, and carry with them different degrees of status and power, but they are also inevitably judged and evaluated by members of the society. In the contemporary USA, in addition to the H variety of Standard American English, there are a number of L varieties of the language, including African American English (Baugh, 2000; Green, 2002, 2011; McWhorter, 1998; Morgan, 2002; Mufwene, Rickford, Bailey & Baugh, 1998; Rickford, 2006; Rickford & Rickford, 2000), varieties of Southern English (Lippi-Green 2012, pp. 214–234), "Spanglish" (González Echevarría, 1997; Morales, 2002; Otheguy & Stern, 2011; Sánchez-Muñoz, 2013), and so on. Such varieties play a key role in maintaining social, economic, and political discrimination in the United States. In this regard, Leah Zuidema has noted, "Linguistic prejudice is one of the few 'acceptable' American prejudices. In polite society, we don't allow jokes that we consider racist or sexist, and we are careful not to disparage a person's religious beliefs. Language is another matter" (2005, p. 686). Not only do we make judgments about the language variety an individual speaks, but we feel perfectly comfortable in expecting speakers of L varieties of

American English to replace their language variety with a more acceptable H variety. As Rosina Lippi-Green has observed, “We do not, cannot under our laws, ask people to change the color of their skin, their religion, their gender, but we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world” (1997, p. 63).

These facets of linguistic diversity have often been correlated with significant levels of conflict in societies throughout human history, at least in part because of the centrality of language to both individual and group identity. Examples of such conflict, which, of course, are related not simply to language but also to other political, social, and economic factors, abound. David Laitin has noted that a Tower of Babel in a single country, in which groups of people speak radically different languages, is all too often portrayed as incendiary. Selig Harrison wrote ominously about the “dangerous decades” that India would face because of its conflicts over language. Popular representations of language conflicts in Belgium, Quebec, and Catalonia suggest that cultural issues of this sort unleash irrational passions, leading otherwise sober people away from the realm of civic engagement.

The recent independence referendum in Catalonia is one clear example (Moreno, 2008; Strubell & Boix-Fuster, 2011; Woolard, 2003, 2013), but others can be found in virtually every part of the world. The language reform which took place in Turkey, following the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, was, for instance, concerned in large part with both orthographic reform, as the Arabic script was replaced with the Latin script, and with efforts to “purify” the Turkish language by eliminating foreign borrowings from Arabic and Persian (e.g., Boeschoten, 1997; Dogançay-Aktuna, 1995; Lewis, 1999; Perry, 1985). At the same time, by attempting to promote one sort of ethnolinguistic nationalism, the Turkish regime effectively disenfranchised other groups, leading in part to the current tensions with the Kurds (Hassanpour, Skutnabb-Kangas & Chyet, 1996; Yavuz, 1998; Zeydanlioglu, 2012). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost all of the newly independent states, excluding Russia itself, as well as Belarus and, for a time, Ukraine, rapidly implemented changes in official language legislation that either drastically reduced or eliminated altogether the role of Russian, leading in turn to language conflicts between native speakers of Russian and others in these countries (Brubaker, 2011; Fierman, 2005; Marshall, 2002; Ozolins, 2003; Pavlenko, 2008a, 2008b).

If language conflict is sometimes the result of language difference, it is, nevertheless, important to note that merely sharing a common language in no

way ensures a lack of conflict. By the end of the 19th century, Ireland was an overwhelmingly monolingual society in which English was the common vernacular, but this in no way minimized the fight for home rule and ultimately independence in the country (Buachalla, 1984; Hindley, 1991; Walsh, 2012). In the history of the United States, both the American Revolutionaries and the Tories were English speakers, as, indeed, were soldiers and citizens of both the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War. More recently, the fact that Serbian and Croatian are arguably simply two varieties of a common South Slavic language, albeit written in two alphabets, in no way prevented the collapse and dismemberment of Yugoslavia, nor did it in any way minimize the horrors of that experience (Magas, 1993; Radan, 2002; Ramet, 2005). In short, it appears to be fairly clear that a shared, common language has little, if any, impact in terms of promoting a common, shared identity, nor even in necessarily promoting good relations between groups if other factors, such as ethnicity, religion, economics, politics, ideology, and so on, are seen as more important.

So, where does this bring us? What has been argued here is that while language is indeed a central feature of our humanity, and although it plays an incredibly important part in our daily lives, its power is tied closely to a variety of other factors, and that while it can and does often play a role in both creating and remediating conflicts between groups on its own, its impact is far more limited. As Peter Nelde observed some years ago:

“The height of a political language conflict is reached when all conflict factors are combined in a single symbol, language, and quarrels and struggles in very different areas [politics, economics, administration, education] appear under the heading language conflict. In such cases, politicians and economic leaders also operate on the assumption of language conflict, disregarding the actual underlying causes, and thus continue to feed “from above” the conflict that has arisen “from below,” with the result that language assumes much more importance than it had at the outset of the conflict. This language-oriented “surface symptom” then obscures the more deeply rooted, suppressed “deeper causes” [social and economic problems].” (1987, p. 35)

There can be no doubt that in many cases in which we find conflict, intolerance, and insensitivity, these are reflected in both attitudes and actions concerned with language. Examples of this phenomenon abound, whether in the denial of basic services to speakers of a language, the lack of education

to children in their mother tongue, access to political and economic power, or in a host of other ways — all of which constitute, in one way or another, the violation of the linguistic human rights of speakers of marginalized languages (Dunbar, 2001; Faingold, 2018; Grin, 2005; Hornberger, 1998; May, 2003, 2006, 2012; Paulston, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, in conjunction with Rannut, 1995; Stroud, 2010). Addressing such violations of fundamental linguistic human rights will not, in the vast majority of instances, completely resolve or eliminate the underlying conflict, but it is, at the very least, a necessary condition for doing so and an important step both symbolically and practically.

## Notes

*Ethnologue: Languages of the world* is published on an annual basis by SIL International and is widely considered to be a fairly standard reference work on the identified languages of the world. The 20th edition of *Ethnologue*, published in 2017, included 7099 languages.

The cuneiform script of Akkadian, including borrowings from Sumerian, was later adopted as the orthography of the Hittite language, spoken in north-central Anatolia in what is today Turkey. Hittite is the oldest attested Indo-European language (Hoffner & Melchert, 2008; Jasanoff, 2003; van den Hout, 2011).

Although there is on-going and quite good, linguistic research being conducted on Esperanto, the best general overview of the grammar of Esperanto grammar is Wennergren (2005).

In fact, determining the success or failure of Esperanto is no easy matter. Although the language never met Zamenhof's own hopes, it is, by far, the most successful of all of the international auxiliary language projects, and has a well-established international speaker community.

The classic description of diglossia is provided in Ferguson (1959), but there is now an extensive research literature on the topic.

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