



Lingua Franca Versus Local Languages? e-Learning in Multi-Lingual Communicative Spaces

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Abstract

Thanks to advanced applications of information and communication technologies (ICT) for new social media; like the Facebook or Twitter, socio-economic activities at a global scale seem more and more borderless and just-in-time, allowing most forms of communication: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many. They open up of new ways and modes of "personalized" communication as far as interactivity, timeliness, active participation, and the cross-border/cultural encounters are concerned, both in virtual and real social communities. More importantly, cross (or multi-) cultural communication in both cyberspace and the real world, quests for both linguistic (text, semantic and phonetic) and visual revolution; all challenge our linguistic skills, not least to acquire the basics of foreign languages as the core part of our new cross-cultural encounters in a globalizing world. Cross-cultural exchanges are mediated by Lingua Franca. In 21st Century information age, ICT-driven linguistic world transformations are more than obvious with inter-and-cross-linguistic mainstreaming. Juxtaposing the dominance of English as Lingua Franca (over 50% of the world webpage), in/ beyond cyberspace; there is yet strong a rejuvenation and revitalization of local (new and highly differentiated cyber-) languages. Cross-cultural and multi-lingual communication has been instrumental to further stimulating social innovations for progressive inter-cultural exchanges, benefiting people at large. This paper examines the new epoch of (e-)learning for new languages; as cyber-linkages are revolutionary in changing the mode of socio-economic interactions, global-locally, behavioural repertoires among people in different geographical regions and time zones: perhaps the most important aspect is the enabling of multilingual, cross-and-inter-cultural communication – hence learning from, with a discovery of, new experience. New social media have been shaping progressive forces for new linguistic development, this paper critically examines issues and policy on (new) language e-learning, multilingualism and cross-cultural communication in/beyond cyberspace: (1) global / transnational situation of cyber-dynamics and new communication, (2) the socio-evolutionary multilingualism in cross-border/cultural communication in Asia-Pacific, contrasting the European case, with special reference to the nation state's e-government and e-learning government initiatives, (3) the new form(s) and (re-) presentations of multilingualism in/beyond the cyberspace, and (4) the future of multilingualism, Lingua Franca vis-a-vis indigenous languages, in a globalizing world.

1. Global / transnational cyber-dynamics and new communication

Historically, the developed economies account for most of the Internet connections and usages (Fig.1). Yet, the developing economies have a different reality. Fink, Mattoo & Rathindran (2002) highlight that the growth for both wired and wireless communications penetration in the developing world has been deriving from the increasingly adoption of multi-modal of telecommunications with a liberalizing (privatizing –cum- competitive) market regime. More specifically, it is the increasingly use of mobile communications. The telecommunications performance in developing countries over in the last decade, as well as a continuing trend, is that there has been the widespread diffusion of mobile telephony. In 1985, most developing countries had virtually no mobile telephony. By 2000, a number of countries, e.g. Cambodia, Cote d'Ivoire, Paraguay, Uganda and Venezuela, had more mobile subscribers than fixed- line subscribers. Interestingly, the middle-east and northern Africa region leads the developing world in mobile penetration (at 6.8 mobile subscribers per 100 people), followed by Latin & Caribbean America (6.3), Asia (2.4) and Sub-Saharan Africa (1.7). In June 2012, out of the total 2405 millions world internet users, the penetration rates are: North America (78.6%), Australia-Oceania (67.6%), Europe (63.2%), followed by Latin America (42.9%) and the Middle East (40.2%). Though the Greater Asia (including central and developing Asia) Internet usage is below the world average; what important here is the recent momentum for the cyber-dynamism in East Asia's Newly Industrializing Economies (NIEs), China and India, the Four Little Dragons (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore), and the earliest developed economy of Japan.



Fig.1: WORLD INTERNET USAGE, 2012

World Regions	Population (2012 Est.)	Internet Users Dec. 31, 2000	Internet Users Latest Data	Penetration (% Population)	Growth 2000-2012
Africa	1,073,380,925	4,514,400	167,335,676	15.6 %	3,606%
Asia	3,922,066,987	114,304,000	1,076,681,059	27.5 %	841%
Europe	820,918,446	105,096,093	518,512,109	63.2 %	393%
Middle East	223,608,203	3,284,800	90,000,455	40.2 %	2,639%
North America	348,280,154	108,096,800	273,785,413	78.6 %	153%
Latin America / Caribbean	593,688,638	18,068,919	254,915,745	42.9 %	1,310%
Oceania / Australia	35,903,569	7,620,480	24,287,919	67.6 %	218%
WORLD TOTAL	7,017,846,922	360,985,492	2,405,518,376	34.3 %	566%

In 21st Century, aided by modern information and communication technologies (ICT), we are entering into a new epoch of capitalism. Cyber-linkages are revolutionary in changing the mode of socio-economic interactions locally and globally, behavioral repertoires among people in different geographical regions and time zones. Socio-economic activities at a global scale seem more and more borderless and just-in-time, allowing most forms of communication: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many. The key issue here is the opening up of new ways and modes of communications as far as interactivity, timeliness, active participation, and the agenda setting are concerned, both in virtual and real social communities. Communication in cyberspace for both linguistic (text, semantic and phonetic) and visual modes are changing as well.

2. Socio-evolutionary multilingualism in cross-cultural communication

Multilingualism becomes an integral part of the globalization project! Multilingualism is also a political (for the EU member states), as well as practical (for the citizens), necessity for the (further) multicultural identity of Europe and the expansion of the European Union, as the ultimate goal of the European Union is "*an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as openly as possible and as closely as possible to the citizen*" (Article 1 of the Treaty on European Union). In addition, as the EU has to respect the national identities of its member states (Article 6 of the Treaty on European Union), the European Commission and the other institutions of the European Union exist to serve the EU and its citizens, a community of peoples with a fascinating variety of customs, characteristics and languages.

The politico-legal foundation for the adoption of national languages into the EU families is the Treaties of Rome (1. January 1958), the very first Regulation adopted by the Council of national ministers (which was - and still is – the supreme law-making body of the European Union) addressed itself to the official languages and working languages to be used. This Council Regulation No.1, which constitutes the legal basis for multilingualism within the EU, has never been changed in substance, only updated with every new accession, as new official languages have been added.

The challenge for an enlarging EU is multi-fold, the widening of multilingualism is foremost the critical one: the increase is from the present 23 official languages to more languages than the Slavonic (Czech, Polish, Slovak, Slovene), but also include the two Baltic languages (Latvian and Lituianian) and two non-European languages which are not Indo-European (Estonian and Hungarian) – all these are against the not-so-long ago historical myths of the 'monolithic' Soviet Union and its empire. Further challenges are now with Romania, Bulgaria and will be as Turkey (will) join.

Perhaps, the challenge is not just in terms of translation and simultaneous interpretations for oral/audio life events, but also the underdevelopment of ICT in the Central and Eastern European societies. The 'digital divide' between rich developed world and the poor developing world is visible even when comparing the transition economies of Eastern Europe and Central Asia with high-income OECD countries.



Paralleling to national language policy, the issue of multilingualism is important for a globalizing world, particularly for the further regionalization processes in certain geo-political regions, representing by the inter-Governmental Organizations, like EU, NAFTA, APEC, ASEAN; but there are unresolved issues like:

- The developments and major investments made by the iGOs and RiGOs (like UN and European Commission) in machine translation had failed to deliver the expected results beyond regional and international institutions. Local people are less benefited from the overall global, multilingual initiatives, vis-à-vis, organizational ones.
- There were economic costs associated with a multilingual, globalizing world through the strong prospect that the effective application of ICT could reduce these – like the case in EU.
- There was concern over the threat to the language industries (personal translation / interpretations) arising from ICT and at the same time some prospects that it could be a source of employment.
- There was concern that the increasing use of English (as *lingua franca*?) in international communication would undermine the integrity of all languages and impact on the use and availability of information in less widely spoken languages.
- The application of ICT was seen as having potential for improving access to information held by the public sector in languages other than those in which it already existed.
- Social benefits in the further multilingual applications by regional and international bodies public use, might be paralleling the economic benefits of the development ICT and the translation-machinery by private vendors (Microsoft, for instance) in this sphere so that a more direct controls over users is questionable
- Resources are required to realize and spread the benefits from the multilingual investments in the application of ICT to language issues. In short, who pay for the bill: the market, the state and/or society (people at large or on individual basis)?

3. New (re-) presentations of multilingualism in/beyond the cyberspace

Throughout the history of cross-cultural communications, the practice for *Lingua Franca* (Espanol/French/German/English) is a consequence of socio-economic necessity under certain geo-political hegemonic influence. English is common used today as business language – in our present day global capitalism, a (post)modernity derived from the highly networking of ICT around the world: the global factory and capital-financing networking. Perhaps, more even so in the ICT development sector and the business inter-activities: more jargons and/or acronyms are used not just for communications between people only, but for the products branding and marketing themselves.

Taking the following txt.msg on mobile phone:

“use mySAP SCM + mySAP ERP on Windows NT -> it lwr TCO”

Literally it means

“use the solutions-software package marketed by [My]SAP (the world largest for Supply Chain Management [SCM], plus SAP’s Enterprise Resource Planning [ERP], running on Microsoft’s Operation System of Windows NT, it lowers TCO [Total Cost of Ownership]

Communications in reality, as well as in cyberspaces require not just the reciprocity of social agencies in terms of networking, but also a parameter for making sense out of the messages in/out codification and de-codification (Katz and Aakhus 2002). The communicative actions and networks imply communities of practice, or epistemic communities, in making sense of textual and semantic meanings within the given context, setting the reciprocal rule(s) of communicative ‘engagement’, as well as (perhaps the most important aspect in) creating new meaning(s) out of the given, limited spaces shaped by the communicative tools (in our case, the Internet for SMS and/or MMS).

The frequent (abusive) use of shared meaning code in txt.msg is a tendency towards standardization of characters, seemingly implying that the standardization of life experience, as well as the harmonization of languages in/beyond cyberspace referring to the simplified English text and ideas.

All the above Three Letter Acronym (TLA), or x-Letter Acronym (x-LA) are more commonly use now a day. Noun / Name – based ABs (abbreviations) and ACs (acronyms) are integral for business communication: LDC (Less Developed Countries), UN, UNDP, UNESCO....

There is virtually no company, department, job role, business process or website that has not got its own x-LA. The EU family (Commission, Parliament, Council of Ministers) has more than several hundreds of acronyms: APEC, ASEAN, EU, EMS, FDI, IMF, NATO, OECD....



The x-LA is replacing the essence of not just multilingual communication, but also the idiosyncratic (re)presentation of ideas and meanings within a particular culture and ethnic group. As the current language regimes within different institutions of the iGOs (UN families, World Bank, WTO and IMF) are in favor of a few languages as the *lingua franca*, or using x-LA as an alternative *lingua franca* form(s), but they are confronted by the political sensitivities of nation states. For RiGos like the EU, the tensions of merging into a few 'working' languages are also strong, as highlighted by the opposition of French and German governments against the proposal for a single language regime.

Paralleling the movement towards one or two languages as *lingua franca* for multicultural communications, acronyms (x-LA) are being used more often, therefore it is not too early to predict that the further *acronymization* of languages will be the case for business, as well as, social communications in and beyond the cyberspace.

One of the key manifestations of cyber-communications, the mobile one in particular, is the shared meaning and mutual usage of common characters, words and text. James N. Rosenau is half right when he pointed out that "The widespread growth of the Internet, the World Wide Web and the other electronic technologies that are shrinking the world offers considerable potential as a source of democracy." (Rosenau 1998: 46). What most important is the shared meaning, identity and trust derived from the existing social relationship, and with this commonness of sharing, there is an emergence of new linguistic form(s) in the mediated communication in general and the mobile communication in particular. The new linguistic form(s) is fully (re-)presented at the texting, text-messaging (txt.msg) and short message sending (SMS) mode of communications.

The enigma, if not the problematic, of present day wired/wireless mediated communications is the re-creation of new text, semantic and symbolism within the given media – the expressed form(s) and manifestation of communications hence is a contingency of technological set up. More often than not, the communications have to customize into the given logics and designs of the communicative tools (e.g., mobile phone and/or PDA with small LCD display screen and miniature buttons) – it ends up into the re-emergence of symbolic code (like the Morse Code in telegraphy). The above txt.msg example of the simplification of the text form, within a given limited characters, used in the txt.msg (Short-Message-Sending, SMS) sending highlights the emergence of a new way communication in term of text-and-meaning in linguistic terms (Kasesniemi, and Rautiainen, 2002) – a new linguistic turn?

Txt.msg is also strategic for political communication and social mobilization, recent studies of social movement informatics (Lai 2002, 2004a/b; Paragas 2003) highlight that the well chosen (political correct and well articulated) wordings are strategic for the success of social protests and movements at local, regional and global levels.

4. Future of multilingualism: *Lingua Franca* vis-a-vis indigenous languages

As human communications are shaping by a highly commercialized regime of interaction, under the speedy and efficiency-driven pressure, the x-Letter-Acronyms (x-LA) become a dominant way of expression of, exchange for ideas. This x-LA communicative short-hand (symbolicism?) has been further reinforcing by the txt.msg, SMS, of the mobile and the Internet communications. The domination of the x-LA (x-Letter-Acronym), with specific reference to text and/or phonetic becomes a global trend. The x-LA also has its lineage to the phoneticism. For instance, "B2B" (Business-to-Business) and "B2C" (Business-to-Consumers), the word "to" is being replaced by a numeric "2". Yet, x-LA is not just an English speaking world phenomenon, take the case of the "EKZ" (Einkaufszentrum, in German, meaning Shopping-Centre).

Socio-functional differentiation with linguistic-knowledge specialization, coupled with generalization of professional knowledge via informational media, plus the further specialization processes of business life, facilitates the development of acronyms. For instance, the EU's Eurodicautom, the world largest multilingual terminology database with specific reference for its 23 official languages, has over 400,000 abbreviations (<http://europa.eu.int/eurodicautom/>). The use of acronyms is becoming the default (sub) linguistic requirement for socio-functional communications in our (post)modern world, more particularly it constitutes to the default communications in cyberspace.

Language embodies socio-cultural meanings and orderings, as well as social etiquettes, but the increasing power of x-LA utilization will likely constitute to the normalization/standardization of cultural differences – Languages will become one dimensional. The one dimensional form/way of communications will only reinforce the existing hierarchical power structure - another form of global/regional imperialism?



Languages and communicative actions are the operational representations of our complex ideas. Though we use to think that 'what we think determines what we speak/write/communicate' but the reality is seemingly the otherwise.

For our challenge, against and beyond the techno-limits, and time/space compression which engender certain reductionism towards techno-monolingualistic communications, multilingual encounters and creative (unique cultural specific) interpretations should be promoted. More specifically for cyber-communications, the written (text, txt msg based SMS) and audio-visual (behavioral, MMS) communications should be liberalized from the simple codification of txt.msg and x-LA. The choice for us is between the continuation of the techno-simplicity of the one-dimensional communications and the multi-cultural diversity which enhances linguistic and cultural customization. The call and actions for multilingualism therefore are to embody the essence of multiculturalism and historical-specificity of time and space, hence the highly differentiation of socio-cultural life experience.

** References are omitted here and can be requested from the author **