



Lingua Franca @ E-learning: Contours of Contradictions in Multilingualism

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Abstract

The new social media-driven phenomenal communicative modes transform e-learning and e-sharing experience in and beyond different linguistic and cultural spaces; 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. The ever-increasingly opening-up of cyber-experience for “inter-personalized” mediated communication, facilitates the interactivity, timeliness, active participation, and the cross-border/cultural encounters in/beyond both in virtual and real social communities. Yet the challenges for cross (or multi-) cultural and temporal-spatial communication in both cyberspace and the real world, quest for not just linguistic (text, semantic and phonetic) adaptation but also audio-visual interactive revolution, towards the communicative capacity building for Lingua Franca: all shaping our linguistic adaptive skills, say the least to acquire the basics of foreign language(s) as the core part of our new cross-cultural encounters in a globalizing world. As cross-cultural exchanges are mostly 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. All these mediated multilingual communications have been instrumental to further stimulating social innovations for progressive inter-cultural exchanges, questionably benefiting e-learning 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-cultural interactions, global-locally, behavioural repertoires among people in different geographical regions and time zones. The most important aspect is the enabling of multilingual, cross-and-inter-cultural communication – hence learning from, with a discovery of, new experience. Critically examining policy issues on (new) language for e-learning and cross-cultural communication in/beyond cyberspace, it highlights the challenges and contradictions on the way for multilingualism in a globalizing world.

1. E-Learning of new language(s) with/in new media of *lingua franca*?

The 21st Century marks a new era for communication, thanks to the advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) -- a new epoch of digital capitalism. Cyber-linkages and new media dynamics are revolutionizing mode(s) of socio-economic interactions locally and globally, behavioral repertoires among people in different geo-temporal spaces. Socio-economic activities at a global-cum-scale are 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.

Yet, communication in cyberspace for both linguistic (text, semantic and phonetic) and visual modes are changing as well; lingua franca is only one of the many possibilities for communication and comprehension of meanings. 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. All communications, ranging from the core to peripheries, the real vis-a-vis the virtuality, are subject to inter-interpretation and exchanges....

For the role of lingua franca, as catalyst of learning new language(s), it can be illustrated by e-learning for foreign language(s) with new media. A recent study shows that most students' beliefs about English remain consistent: they cared less about grammar after using English as a *lingua franca* in their written communication; and started to perceive English as a language they may be able to use with greater confidence (Ke & Cahyani 2014).

More specific, socio-cultural context and communicative dynamics yet define the parameters and extends of foreign language learning, in both traditional and new media-driven learning milieu – it is revealed that English (as lingua franca, ELF) users' institutional roles are culturally determined, and are not fixed but vary in different phases of the discourse. More importantly, both identity and power interplay are involved in ELF communications, and the macro linguistic context plays a role in



constructing identity and negotiating power relations in ELF conversations (Gu, Patkin & Kirkpatrick 2014).

Taking English as an obvious example of the common lingua franca (ELF) in recent decades for international communication; the use of ELF has more non-native speakers than native speakers, and it is more than obvious in far more settings where there are no native speakers present than in those between or including native speakers. Seemingly, there is a challenge for lingua franca being used beyond its socio-cultural embedness and settings – many of these settings are beyond contexts of language learning, due to increased transnational mobilities of all walks of life – thanks to the globalization project for enhancing mobility of capital, goods and labours.

Furthermore, it has been strongly articulated that an ownership discourse and a maintenance (or cultivation) discourse - for English as lingua franca, should be distinguished; whilst the appreciation of lingua franca should be cultivated with inter-cultural and linguistic understandings in real life within, and beyond in virtual communication, its socio-cultural contexts (cf. Haberland 2011).

Conversely speaking, the challenge for new language learning in new media spaces with a particular lingua franca is the amplexness of contextual fluidity with new and old varieties and differences – which need to be specified and articulated by learners and instructors in new media spaces and gaps. Hence, the lack of contextual specificity and relational orders in new media poses another challenge for the fostering echoed and responsive learning milieu.

2. The codified noises or voices in the cyberspace?

New media communication tools and modes like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *WhatsApp* or the *Line* redraw the landscape of inter-cultural understanding. Throughout the history of cross-cultural communications, the practice for *Lingua Franca* (Spanish/French/German/English) is a consequence of socio-economic necessity under certain geo-political hegemonic influence. English is commonly 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.

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.

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).

To highlight the noises (voices) in cyberspaces - taking the following text-messaging (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]

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 used 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.

Txt.msg is also strategic for political communication and social mobilization, recent studies of social movement informatics 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.

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 – a new linguistic turn conditioned by communicative gadget-modes?

3. Challenges for *lingua franca* based e-learning and beyond

Languages and communicative actions are the operational representations, and integration, 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.

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.

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).

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?

For our challenge, against and beyond the techno-limits, and time/space compression which engender certain reductionism towards techno-monolingual 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 historico-specificity of time and space, hence the highly differentiation of socio-cultural life experience. Multilingualism is prevailing; becoming the key mode(s) for communicative e-learning; yet national policy for language learning development - with the exception of the EU member states - is still very much historically-bound with the past and/or ethnicity development agenda, which is unintentionally creating more barriers for inter-cultural-diversity understanding. More specific, there is urgent need to revitalize multicultural differential comprehension as key strategic goal for (new) language e-learning via cross-cultural communication in/beyond cyberspace in a globalizing world.

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