

Embracing the “other” tongue as the quickest path to harmony

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ABSTRACT: The rise of English as a lingua franca has undeniably facilitated communication in global contexts and within multilingual societies. Yet, it has paradoxically given rise to social disparities and divisions, invoking profound ethical and philosophical inquiries. Simultaneously, the rise of English has posed a formidable challenge to language programs dedicated to teaching languages other than English (LOTE). This paper elucidates the pivotal role of LOTE instruction in mitigating linguistic discrimination while concurrently forging pathways toward diversity and inclusion.

KEYWORDS: culture; language; identity; multilingualism; globalization; discrimination; ideology; education

1. Introduction

The emergence of English as a lingua franca undeniably streamlines communication in global contexts and within multilingual societies. However, this convenient tool paradoxically exacerbates social disparities and divisions, raising profound ethical and philosophical questions. Concurrently, the rise of English presents a formidable challenge to language programs dedicated to teaching languages other than English (LOTE). In the era of globalization, linguistic discrimination perpetuates cultural and ethnic stereotyping, as well as ideological wars. When a multilingual community becomes fractured by ideological wars, the most direct path to dismantling linguistic discrimination is often found in embracing another language, even if only for a brief moment. In this context, the teaching of LOTE in higher education regains its significance as an alternative venue for promoting diversity and inclusion while bypassing ideological wars. This can be achieved through the appropriate repositioning of LOTE education to align with the demands of the globalized era.

2. English in global contexts

In 2012, Lawrence Summers, a former president of Harvard University (2001–2006) and a former United States Secretary of the Treasury (1999–2001) made a statement that undervalues LOTE learning:

English’s emergence as the global language, along with the rapid progress in machine translation and the fragmentation of languages spoken around the world, make it less clear that the substantial investment necessary to speak a foreign tongue is universally worthwhile. While there is no gainsaying the insights that come from mastering a language, it will over time become less essential in doing business in Asia, treating patients in Africa, or helping resolve conflicts in the Middle East.

(Summers)^[1]

For Summers, languages are tools for information exchange, and he dismisses the reality that languages embody their speakers’ cultural and social identities^[2,3]. Students of LOTE know better than Summers that languages carry cultural factors essential for forming harmonious human relationships, to

which we must be sensitive. I still remember the first Japanese class I taught at my university three decades ago. After introducing a simple Japanese phrase, *Yoroshiku onegai shimasu*, to someone we met for the first time, I was overwhelmed with the number and the kinds of questions I received from my students. They delved into various aspects, including the dynamics between two people or among three people. They also paid attention to facial expressions, eye contact, gestures like handshaking and bowing, and how these factors shape perceptions of individuals as humble, polite, assertive, or aggressive. I did not know how to answer some of the questions at that time. The reason I received so many questions for just one phrase, *Yoroshiku onegai shimasu*, may have been due to my students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It was truly an eye-opening experience for me, having learned Japanese subconsciously and grown up in Japan as a monolingual Japanese speaker. Even now, students' insightful questions continually remind me of the intricate relationships between language and its users' cultural identities, which manifest in their emotions, attitudes, and behaviors during interactions. Summers^[1] trivializes the identities of individuals whose dominant language is English as he advocates for an English-only monolingual approach to communication.

Even in the professional contexts mentioned by Summers^[1], such as “doing business in Asia, treating patients in Africa, or helping resolve conflicts in the Middle East,” the ignorance of the identities of individuals in marginalized cultures has already led to international tension and conflict. Even when people from diverse linguistic backgrounds communicate in English as a lingua franca, their approaches to expressions of gratitude, requests, and refusals vary significantly due to the diverse cultures, histories, experiences, beliefs, and values they carry with them while using English as a shared language.

3. English in multilingual societies

The ignorance of the cultural and social identity of others is also happening within Anglophone societies. Recent globalization and migration have created a hybrid linguistic landscape in many places, but linguistic hybridity is not embraced in all multilingual communities, especially in Anglophone societies, where English has been the dominant language that determines one's academic and economic success. This has created serious social issues in multilingual communities in Anglophone societies.

First, individuals who do not possess “native-like” competence in standard English are disadvantaged at schools and workplaces. Job postings often have language proficiency requirements that favor fluent English speakers. Even LOTE teacher candidates who are native or heritage speakers of the target language face difficulties in passing a high-stakes assessment for world language teacher candidates such as edTPA due to their skills in English^[4]. Goldhaber et al.^[5] reported that Hispanic teacher candidates in Washington State were three times more likely to fail the edTPA, which presumably limited the state's ability to have a diverse teaching workforce. This is unexpected because their linguistic skills in Spanish are at native or near-native levels.

Second, those who speak English with an accent face linguistic discrimination. Dovchin^[6] depicts the challenges faced by a young Mongolian girl educated in a Russian-medium high school who spoke functional English with a heavy Russian accent in Australia, enduring ridicule, mockery, and sexism, causing her distress and unfair treatment. Lee^[7] recognizes xenophobic and sexist online comments directed at Melania Trump, the wife of Donald Trump and a native of Slovenia, including derogatory terms such as “hooker”, “bitch”, and “prostitute”, which were attributed to her English accent.

Third, those who dominantly speak a non-English language in public are feared, stigmatized, and discriminated against. There have been reports of incidents where people have been harassed or asked to

stop speaking their native language in public places like stores or on public transportation.

English as a lingua franca implicitly grants speakers of “standard” American or British English sociopolitical and socioeconomic advantages while simultaneously acting as a passive-aggressive impediment to harmonious multilingualism. English as a lingua franca raised not just linguistic, educational, and economic inequality but also cultural, political, and ethical divisions^[8].

4. Linguistic discrimination

As described in the previous sections, language can become a cause of discrimination against speakers of other languages. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas defines linguistic discrimination, or *linguicism*, as:

Ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language (on the basis of their mother tongues).

(Skutnabb-Kangas)^[9]

Linguistic discrimination typically arises due to individuals who idolize, promote, and adhere to monolingualism within their community or country. In a monolingualized sociocultural environment, those whose English exhibits “non-native” accents or “incorrect” grammar are often disrespected, misunderstood, disengaged, or even excluded. The linguistic difference indeed “quickly and quite systematically” gives rise to inequality between speakers^[10] and gradually fosters long-term educational and economic inequality.

Linguistic discrimination perpetuates cultural and ethnic stereotyping. It makes a multilingual society pluralistic and divided^[11,12], where multilingualism is a collection of monolingualisms that resist hybridization and maintain linguistic and cultural silos.

5. Ideological wars and monolingualism

Linguistic discrimination contributes, at least partially, to serious racial discrimination, socio-historical conflicts, and geo-political tensions, which became alarming in the 2020s when our societies suffered from the onset of the pandemic as well as political divisions. We saw such social disturbances in the rise of Asian hate crimes and Black Lives Matter movements, followed by the ban on certain library books. Grade schools in many US states banned the teaching of diversity and critical thinking over race and removed books about them from their libraries. Some parents and educational leaders demanded the elimination of the discussion of diversity and the history of struggles in schools. They believe that they are protecting their children, but they are preparing for a monocultural community, just like what colonization did to the cultures and languages of the marginalized people.

To address these social issues, many global universities have made a commitment to promote diversity and inclusion. Unlike grade schools, universities offer a safe space for students to freely engage in critical thinking without the need for parental approval. However, we cannot guarantee educational freedom at universities, either. In May 2023, the governor of Florida signed a bill into law banning the state’s public colleges and universities from spending money on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs. Such nationalistic and conservative waves have posed a significant threat to academic freedom, sparking widespread outrage and debate throughout the United States. Ideological wars can be easily politicized, violently escalated, and instantly and widely spread through social media. They often result in xenophobia, the stereotyping of individuals based on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as well as their race, religion, and occupation.

We find ourselves retracing our steps through history, moving in the opposite direction to progress. More than 100 years ago, Theodore Roosevelt stated:

... We have room for but one flag, the American flag and we have room for but one language here and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, and American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house; and we have room for but one sole loyalty, and that is loyalty to the American people...

(Theodore Roosevelt Association)^[13]

As pointed out by John C. Maher, Roosevelt's words reverberate in today's English-only monolingualizing orientation in the USA^[14]. The Commonwealth of Virginia has designated English as its official language, and similar endeavors, such as the one in Tennessee in 2009, have emerged to restrict city administrations from employing languages other than English^[14]. Nevertheless, the implementation of legally mandated monolingual policies has the potential to erode equality within a multilingual society.

6. Understanding the culture of the other using English

To respond to the urgent issue of cultural/linguistic divisions discussed so far, many global universities started to promote inclusion, diversity, and equity (IDE) in the 2020s. Committing to IDE is necessary for global universities to maintain their integrity and strength because diverse students, faculty, and staff can leverage their differences to develop innovative ideas, think critically, deepen their understanding of the humanities, and learn how to contribute to making our world more tolerable and harmonious.

One way to achieve this is to offer courses that teach different cultures in higher education. Nevertheless, if these courses are conducted exclusively in English, the knowledge acquired by students tends to be second-hand. It would be the interpretation of the culture of the other by the instructor or the authors of the textbooks and reading materials required for the course. Scholarly generalizations about a foreign culture can indeed offer valuable insights, but these insights can sometimes be influenced by the scholar's own agendas, the technical terminologies in English, and the research methodologies rooted in Western academic contexts. For example, there are numerous books and articles that flood the market with a claim to identify the essence of "Japaneseness", establishing a genre called Nihonjinron, which literally means "theories of the Japanese people^[15]". Scholars typically compare unfamiliar phenomena with those in their own culture and generalize them using their familiar concepts and terminologies. This could easily exoticize or stereotype the Japanese.

Philosophers know that such a danger is inherent in any interpretation. Hans-Georg Gadamer views understanding as an interpretative process shaped by the interpreter's prejudices:

The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust. In light of this insight, it appears that historicism, despite its critique of rationalism and of natural law philosophy, is based on the modern Enlightenment and unwittingly shares its prejudices. And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power.

(Gadamer)^[16]

There are concepts and values that are easily misrepresented in a different language, especially in the arts and music. For example, words that represent aesthetics, sensitivities, emotions, and thoughts rooted

in Asia or Africa may not have equivalent words in the West. Translators may be able to manage to create English translations, but Gadamer^[17] states that “it may be difficult to understand what is said in a foreign or ancient language, but it is still more difficult to let something be said to us even if we understand what is said right away.” Understanding goes beyond mere translation or comprehension of words. It must allow the text or the message to speak to us, engage us, and let us feel it in a meaningful way. Relying on someone else’s interpretations can deprive students of their opportunity to directly access other cultures and identities through their own knowledge systems.

Translators frequently encounter untranslatable concepts in source texts, and their approach to untranslatability varies according to their ideologies and their fundamental views on the essence of translation. In addition, translators have their own agendas and ideology-driven perspectives. A translation may represent the culture of another for the convenience of the audience.

As a result, we hear metaphors such as “translator, traitor”. Translation practices have facilitated the establishment of asymmetrical power relationships between people from the Global North and those from the Global South or even the Global East^[18–20]. This could promote stereotyping and marginalization of people with different cultural backgrounds. Unless students are exposed to an adequately broad range of scholarly authors with varied interpretations and English translations, they are prone to accepting a monolithic westernized view of a different culture, such as “Nihonjinron”, discussed above.

Literary translation faces a similar fate, often oscillating between two extremes: literal translations that may ruin the aesthetic of the source texts, or adaptive translations that may undergo the distortion of the source culture to align with the prevailing ideology of the translation’s intended readership. Accordingly, literary translation is often manipulative rewriting^[21]. A well-known example is Fitzgerald’s English translation of Rubáiyát, Omar Khayyám’s collection of Persian quatrains. He felt Iranians were inferior, so he tried to improve it, which led to commercial success. For Lefevere^[21], translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting, and the decisions driven by considerations of an ideological and/or pathological nature win out the decisions driven by linguistic considerations if they are in competition:

Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewriting can introduce new concepts and new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another.

(Lefevere)^[21]

Niranjana^[19] identifies the means for marginalizing the non-west when missionaries, linguists, and translators describe those colonized in English. Similarly, Spivak^[20] criticizes the power imbalance found in English translations of Third World literature. The people and their lives are repainted so they can be easily accessible and pleasant to the target audience. This is not only the translator’s fault. They are receiving societal pressure from editors and publishers, who are also receiving pressure from critiques and end-readers of translations. As a result, many translations are made fluent without the trace of translation-like stylistic features, for the sake of positive reception from the readers of translations.

Venuti^[22] critiques the prevailing translation practices in Anglophone contexts that marginalize both the source text and its originating culture. He argues that translation practices in Anglophone societies often eliminate any trace of foreignness from the translated work, rendering it so fluent that it seems to be

the “original”, and to the extent that the translator becomes imperceptible. He calls this phenomenon “the translator’s invisibility”. The translator’s invisibility is implemented by setting the highest priority for translations to be accepted by reviewers, publishers, and readers in the receiving culture of translation^[23]. For Venuti, a translator’s invisibility is an ethical issue:

This relationship points to the violence that resides in the very purpose and activity of translation: the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that preexist it in the target language, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts.

(Venuti)^[23]

Sato^[24] also sees a problem with monolingualizing orientation in translation practices in Anglophone societies and argues that it results from the monolingualizing ideologies that are prevalent there. This is evident because translation practices in a society that traditionally embraces multilingualism freely allow the hybridization of features of different languages in translated texts, even when translated texts are in English. She explains this phenomenon as the manifestation of translanguaging practices that underlie translation practices, driven by the translator’s creativity and criticality^[24,25].

7. Language, identity, and context

Vygotsky states that languages are learned through socially contingent interactions with others and help us learn concepts and develop our thoughts^[26]. Certainly, an individual’s identity is profoundly shaped by the ideology-saturated sociocultural environment, and it continuously evolves through language usage in socially contingent interactions, akin to what is exemplified in Atkinson’s^[2] “contact dance”.

Likewise, word meanings are pores, and they gain meaning as they are used in communicative interactions situated in a social context. Language symbolically embodies its users’ experiences, memories, emotions, beliefs, values, and ideologies that are enacted only in its use^[27]. With this respect, languages are indeed living: Language is “languaging”, a dynamic, never-ending process of meaning-making^[28].

This explains why learning a language sparks a multitude of inquiries, much like the curiosity my students exhibited when I taught Japanese at an American college many years ago. Language learning opens one’s eyes to different cultures, societies, and values. At the moment of using the language of the other, even partially, one can tangibly feel their culture, and fear of culturally different people implanted in our brains by media, critics, and even parents and grandparents can cease to serve as a wall. Such experiences create a direct pathway to the other and facilitate the creation of human relationships overriding cultural fear. I consider it of utmost significance in the present globalized era, even though it might not draw the interest of individuals like Lawrence Summers, whose focus lies solely on the cost-efficiency of transactional communication.

8. Conclusion

Language embodies the identity and culture of its users. So, language can serve as a gateway to fostering harmonious human relationships when individuals are open-minded and willing to both listen and try out each other’s language, even if only partially. Quoting a line from James Joyce’s novel, “*The Shortest Way to Tara is via Holyhead*”, Maher claims that to enter another language, even for one moment, is to become an exile^[14]. This helps one see their origins better. There is an additional value to it, which

is that it allows one to directly taste the culture of the other. Extending this logic, when a multilingual community is divided and filled with ideological wars, the shortest way to dissolve linguistic discrimination is to enter another language, even for one moment. In this light, teaching LOTE in higher education regains its value as an alternative venue for promoting diversity and inclusion, bypassing ideological wars. However, this can be achieved only if LOTE education is appropriately repositioned to align with the era of globalization.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest.

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