Interpreting, Communication & Global English

Multilingual conferences with expert language interpretation foster participation and effective communication.

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Today many international conferences are monolingual, which usually means English only. In many others English is designated as the only language to be spoken in the room, while interpretation into one or more other tongues is made available.

The significance of what these two models share – namely that everyone must speak English – is of no greater import than what is clearly implied in the second option: that one-way communication with a touch of courtesy for the others is enough.

It’s time to ask if an invitation to listen to one’s mother tongue without the concomitant right to speak it leads to effective communication – and related questions: What’s behind this all-English trend? Is communication actually desired? Is monolingualism really about saving money? Might multilingualism be more cost-effective than the alternative when examined from a broader perspective?

Language matters

Power and language have always been intertwined, and many have written on the matter better than I can. As Gramsci noted: "Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore.” [i]

And as Antonio de Nebrija wrote in the prologue of his Gramática de la lengua castellana (1493): "Siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio.” [ii]

This was not simply a pretty phrase coined to impress the court. As Zhenja La Rosa comments: “It was prophetic, in that throughout the conquest of the Americas, and the centuries of colonialism, language was used by the Spanish as a tool for conquest: to consolidate political power, to spread the Catholic faith, and to unify the empire.” [iii] Is something similar happening today?

No language is neutral, not even so-called Global English. A language is embedded in a specific culture, a way of thinking, a belief system, a vital approach to existence. That is its beauty and much is lost when a person cannot address others in her or his native tongue-. As former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher put it: "In a foreign language I say what I can. In my own language I say what I want.”
The idea of using a simplified form of English as a *lingua franca* has been around for a long time and should be considered within an evolving political context. *Basic English* was published by Charles Kay Ogden in 1930, and was especially popular after the end of World War II. Winston Churchill advocated for it in his *Anglo American Unity speech* [iv], identifying it as an essential part of post-war policy and collaboration between his country and the United States. After a short period of support for Basic English, George Orwell reconsidered; it’s said that the construct informed his creation of Newspeak. [v]

More recently Jean-Paul Nerrière brought the idea into the age of commercial globalization by creating Globish™, “a subset of standard English grammar, and a list of 1500 English words” [vi] which he recommends for use in international business – and of which he has made a global business. To be fair, Nerrière claims that his trademarked product will actually “limit the influence of (English)” and sees himself as “helping the rescue of French, and of all the languages that are threatened by English today but which will not be at all endangered by Globish. It is in the best interests of non-Anglophone countries to support Globish, especially if you like your culture and its language.” [vii] Mr. Nerrière might be sincere, but he is also admitting that global English is of limited expressiveness and unsuitable to situations in which ideas, beliefs and emotion matter.

Even the European Union is drifting toward less multilingualism under the guise of reducing costs. Yet the amount being spent is not that great. According to the European Commission (emphasis from the original): “(T)he cost of all language services in all EU institutions amounts to less than 1% of the annual general budget of the EU. Divided by the population of the EU, this comes to around €2 per person per year.” [viii] Moreover, commentators point out that any savings in the area of languages would be ephemeral as costs in other areas would likely increase. [ix]

This section was intended to highlight a few issues behind the English-only trend. Let’s now return to meeting dynamics with an example.

**Participation in multilingual meetings**

I have seen many illustrations of the assumption that translation is for *the others*, a service offered with a sense of *noblesse oblige* adapted to today’s model of globalization. Here’s one.

Some years ago, on the first morning of a conference, I stopped by the table where headsets were being distributed to say hello to the people working with the equipment. As we chatted, an attendee came by to request a headset, which led to this short exchange (I don’t blame the employees in any way; they probably received instructions on what to tell people):

*Are you handing out the interpreting sets? What do you need from me?*

*Do you speak English?*

*Yes.*

*Well, then you don't need one.*

Fast forward to the first session. The panelists all spoke English, but in the Q&A one participant approached a microphone and said he would prefer to use Spanish, one of the official languages. As he started to speak, the panelists realized they had no receivers. Immediately there was a flurry of activity, the meeting was interrupted, and someone was sent out to fetch headsets. Other attendees
also went in search of the same. The ensuing delay was embarrassing for all and finally the Spanish speaker said what he would try to manage in English. And that set the tone for the rest of the week; no one spoke anything but English. Some participants probably chose not to speak.

This anecdote illustrates what interpreters know and what research is beginning to confirm, namely that active participation declines when people are kept from speaking their native language. Communication becomes one-directional. The audience may be invited to pose questions, but they are not treated as interlocutors.

**Conclusions**

Communication is not a simple commodity. If the aim is to share ideas on an equal footing and find mutual understanding, simplified English is never enough. In international conferences a chance to listen to one’s native language should be accompanied by the right to speak it– and be truly heard. Multilingualism must be embraced, its benefits appreciated. Expert interpretation fosters greater participation and nuanced communication across cultural divides.

**Further Reading**

- Dominique Hoppe: *Le coût du monolinguisme*
- John McWhorter: *Is English Special Because It's "Globish"?*
- Robert Phillipson: *English as threat: reality or myth?*
- Robert Phillipson: *The business of English, global panacea or pandemic? Myths and realities of ‘Global' English*

**From Communicate!/The AIIC Webzine**

- Vincent Buck: *One world, one language?*
- Roderick Jones: *Interpreting: A communication profession in a world of non-communication*
- Martin Wooding: *The notion of an international language and the case of English*

**Footnotes**


[ii] Language has always been the handmaiden of empire.


[v] Illich, Ivan; Barry Sanders (1988). *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind.* San Francisco: North Point Press. p. 109.ISBN 0-86547-291-2. The satirical force with which Orwell used Newspeak to serve as his portrait of one of those totalitarian ideas that he saw taking root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere can be understood only if we remember that he speaks with shame about a belief that he formerly held... From 1942 to 1944, working as a colleague of William Empson's, he produced a series of broadcasts to India written in Basic English, trying to use its programmed simplicity, as a *Tribune* article put it, as a sort of corrective to the oratory of statesmen and publicists. “Only during the last year of the war did he write ‘Politics and the English Language’, insisting that the defense of English language has nothing to do with the setting up of a
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