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# The language of diplomacy

## English in diplomacy

Among the diplomatic languages English is the most popular; it is the first choice amongst the masses and the elite alike. In addition to the 375 million native speakers, it has been suggested that 1.1 billion people know English as a second or foreign language, outnumbering the native speakers by 3 to 1. 51 % of Europeans speak English as their native or as a foreign language. With a great tolerance for linguistic variations, English as a global language has become the language of power and prestige and thereby an international gate-keeper to social and economic progress. The current dominance of English as a world language is undisputed. It plays an official or working role in most international organizations.

English has replaced French as the lingua franca of diplomacy since World War II. The rise of English in diplomacy began in 1919, in the aftermath of World War I, when the Treaty of Versailles was written in English as well as in French, the dominant language used in diplomacy at that time. The widespread use of English was further advanced by the prominent international role played by English-speaking nations (i.e., the United States and the Commonwealth of Nations) in the aftermath of World War II, particularly in the establishment and organization of the United Nations and the development of the Internet. English is one of the six official languages of the UN and, along with French, one of its two working languages (the others are Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish). English is the current lingua franca of international business, science, technology, and aviation.

The modern trend to use English outside of English-speaking countries has a number of sources. In the latter half of the 20th century, its widespread use was mostly due to the military, economic, and cultural dominance of the United States of America. English is also regarded by some as an unofficial global lingua franca owing to the economic, cultural, and geopolitical power of most of the developed Western nations in world financial and business institutions. The de facto status of English as the lingua franca in these countries has carried over globally as a result. English is also overwhelmingly dominant in scientific and technological communications, and all of the world's major scientific journals are published in English. English is also the lingua franca of international Air Traffic Control communications.

Talking about the history of diplomatic language it is very important to say that from the 17th century to 20th, French was the main language of international relations. In this context in 1539, François the First passed an important ordinance in the history of the French language: The Villers-Cotterêts Ordinance decreed that all French administrative documents must be in French. This ordinance was a crucial turning point in the French language, making it an official language and creating a sense of nationalism within the country. From 1550 through the 19th century, when France was the leading European power, the French language flourished and was spoken throughout the world. For this reason, French became known as a language of diplomacy and international relations in the 17th century. French was widely used in international diplomacy for two main reasons: first, because France used to be a huge political power. It was commonly used in the whole of Europe from the 18th century, with the reign of Louis XIV. Later, Napoleon "helped" the language spread even further. The use of French in international treaties declined with the emergence of the USA after the First World War; in fact, the Treaty of Versailles was written both in English and in French.

The second main reason is that it is the language of clarity and precision: it uses many determiners, adverbs, conjunctions, and the like to link parts of sentences and clarify their relationships. This links very well with the "foisonnement" (expansion) phenomenon in translation from English to French, with the French translation being on average 15% longer than the source text. Conversely, English is more likely to create ambiguity and its concision can be seen as bluntness, which was described in the programme as "the enemy of polite discourse". Nowadays, despite the French language losing much of its prestige, the language of English diplomacy is still haunted by a few French ghosts, here and there: *regime, coup, etiquette, rapprochement* and others.

The term "language of diplomacy" obviously can be interpreted in several ways. In this sense, the use of language in diplomacy is of major importance, since language is not a simple tool, vehicle for transmission of thoughts, or instrument of communication, but often the very essence of the diplomatic vocation, and that has been so from the early beginnings of our profession. That is why from early times the first envoys of the Egyptian pharaohs, Roman legates, mediaeval Dubrovnik consuls, etc., had to be educated and trained people, well-spoken and polyglots.

**Choice of language**

Let us first look into different aspects of diplomatic language in its basic meaning – that of a tongue. Obviously, the first problem to solve is finding a common tongue. Diplomats only exceptionally find themselves in the situation of being able to communicate in one language, common to all participants. This may be done between, for example, Germans and Austrians, or Portuguese and Brazilians, or representatives of different Arab countries, or Britishers and Americans, etc. Not only are such occasions rare, but very often there is a serious difference between the “same” language used in one country and another.

There are several ways to overcome the problem of communication between people who speak different mother tongues. None of these is ideal. One solution, obviously, is that one of the interlocutors speaks the language of the other. Problems may arise: the knowledge of the language may not be adequate, one side is making a concession and the other has an immediate and significant advantage, there are possible political implications, it may be difficult to apply in multilateral diplomacy, etc. A second possibility is that both sides use a third, neutral, language. A potential problem may be that neither side possesses full linguistic knowledge and control, leading to possible serious misunderstandings. Nevertheless, this method is frequently applied in international practice because of its political advantages. A third formula, using interpreters, is also very widely used, particularly in multilateral diplomacy or for negotiations at a very high political level - not only for reasons of equity, but because politicians and statesmen often do not speak foreign languages. This method also has disadvantages: it is time consuming, costly, and sometimes inadequate or straightforwardly incorrect (even if the translator has a good knowledge of both languages, he/she may not be familiar with the particular subject which can be extremely specific – from the protection of the ozone layer to the homologisation of sports records; it was not without reason that the slogan *traduttore-traditore* 'translator = traitor', was found in mediaeval Italy). Finally, there is the possibility of using one international synthetic, artificial language, such as Esperanto; this solution would have many advantages, but unfortunately is not likely to be implemented in the near future, mostly because of the opposition of factors that dominate in the international political – and therefore also cultural and linguistic – scene.

So, which language is the best choice for diplomatic use? The answer is not simple at all. To start with, there is no single diplomatic lingua franca that could be inscribed in the above-mentioned catchphrase. In the past there were periods when one language or another served as a common, widely-used means of inter-state communication, although usually

limited to certain geographic areas or political groups of countries. Such a role was played by Acadian (Asyrian-Babilonian), by literary Chinese, by Greek "koin`e" (a mixture of dialects, based mainly on Ionic and Attic), and later by mediaeval Greek, then Latin, Arabic, Turkish, and yet later by Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Italian, Dutch, German, French, and recently, more and more, by English. Very often attempts have been made to impose one language or another, with the argumentation that it is "clearer", "more flexible", "more expressive", "more eloquent, subtle or refined", "most suitable for international negotiations", etc. The mere fact that historically such a role has been taken in turns by so many languages proves that linguistic or semantic reasons are not decisive.

On the contrary, it can be said that the dominant role of one language or another in diplomacy has resulted from the political, strategic, economic, cultural or other domination of one power or another in international relations.

Let's consider a very precise example: the linguistic requirements of diplomats in the Permanent Representations of the Council of Europe. Obviously, diplomats first need a good knowledge of French, particularly if their professional activity is oriented towards social circles, press, consular work or cultural life. If diplomat wishes to mix freely with other diplomats he will first need English, and possibly also German and Russian as well (depending on the sections of the diplomatic corps they are primarily interested in contacting).

**Written communications**

The use of language in written diplomatic communication is usually explicitly determined (most often by bilateral agreement). Generally speaking, it is based upon one of the fundamental principles of contemporary international law - the principle of sovereign equality of states. In application of this principle to the linguistic ground there are several formulas - each implemented in a symmetrical way:

a) each side writes its communications (notes, letters, etc.) in its own language (e.g., the Croatian Ministry in Zagreb, as well as the Croatian Embassy in Budapest, write in Croatian, while the Hungarian Ministry and their Embassy in Zagreb write in Hungarian);

b) each side writes in the language of the other side (opposite from practice a);

c) the correspondence in each country is conducted in the local language (e.g. both sides in Zagreb correspond in Croatian, while in Budapest they do so in Hungarian);

d) both sides use a third, mutually agreed, language - e.g., Russian, French or other. Again, each of these formulas has its advantages, but also its deficiencies.

Communication in multilateral diplomacy, of course, is even more complicated, inadequate, and costly.[1] Various international organizations and numerous diplomatic conferences try – more or less successfully – to solve the linguistic problem by reducing the innumerable possibilities of intercommunication to a relatively small number of selected languages - so called official or working languages.

It is obvious that the growing democratization of international relations results, among other things, in an ever growing number of languages used in multilateral diplomacy. While the idea of the sovereign equality of nations and states, small and large, rich and poor, cannot be questioned, the astronomical cost of interpretation at conferences and translation of an enormous amount of written material for international organizations speaks very much against this aspect of its implementation in practical life. Furthermore, the use of interpretation is slow, impersonal, very often incorrect, and sometimes grossly wrong. As an illustration, an almost unbelievable example could be mentioned which concerns nothing less than the very name of the United Nations in different linguistic versions of the world organization's "bible" – its charter. In English, French, and Spanish it is called the "United Nations". In Russian, however, it is named "Organization of the United Nations". The same has been transferred, probably from Russian, to Bulgarian as well.

Another phenomenon is well known to all diplomats with experience in the work of international organizations or various other multilateral conferences: delegates who do not speak one of the official or working languages well (or who are simply too self-critical about it) hesitate to take the floor at all, or miss the best moment to do so. Thus, they considerably reduce their own delegation's input and probably also reduce the potential value of the final result of the meeting.

Leaving the question of the choice of language aside, we can examine a more substantial aspect of language and diplomacy – the aspect of the message itself, the message contained in every diplomatic communication, oral or written.

**Requirements for oral communications**

Oral communication is the quintessence of personal contact, which, in turn, remains the very substance, even the *raison d'etre* of diplomatic work. Written communications, telegraph, telephone, fax, and recently various interactive IT systems (Minitel, Internet, electronic mail, etc.) are undoubtedly extremely useful and often much faster and more efficient than personal contacts, but they can not and probably for a long time shall not be able to substitute for a friendly, confidential chat over a cup of coffee.[2]

Every verbal discourse, be it a simple chat, conversation, exchange of views, formal diplomatic *démarche*, official negotiation, or any other form, basically is a dialogue, and therefore consists of speaking and listening to the other person. Speaking includes accentuation of some words or emphasis of particular parts of a sentence. Oral communication also involves a number of "side effects", such as tone of voice (friendly, solemn, confidential, menacing, nonchalant, etc.), pauses between words or sentences, the order in which different parts of the message are presented, gesticulation, facial miming, smiling and so on.[3]

**Word choice in diplomacy**

The choice of the right words is extremely important in diplomacy. Through the centuries a very carefully balanced, restrained, moderate vocabulary has been developed, ensuring a particular way of refined control over nuances in the meaning of words - both when agreeing with one's interlocutor (but taking care not to give the impression of undue enthusiasm!) as well as in rejecting their views (again with fitting concern to avoid undesired offence).

When a diplomat interprets their interlocutor's language and even single words used in a dialogue or correspondence, they always start from the presumption that the choice of words and phrasing has been conscientious and deliberate. Nobody should, nor indeed does, assume that the words used are the result of insufficient knowledge of a language, inadequate translation or, even less, a momentary bad mood! Knowing that the text will be scrutinized in such a way, the speaker or writer has to be accordingly careful about the formulations used. This is more sensitive when preparing a written text since it cannot be softened or corrected once it has been sent out, while in conversation, if the reaction of the other side is negative, one can always say "Let me explain..." or "In other words..." and declare something completely different from the original version.

**Pragmatics and semantics in diplomacy**

Words are bricks from which sentences are made. Each sentence should be a wound-up thought. If one wants to be clear, and particularly when using a language which one does not master perfectly, it is better to use short, simple sentences. On the contrary, if one wishes to camouflage one thoughts or even not say anything specific, it can be well achieved by using a more complicated style, complex sentences, digressions, interrupting one's own flow of thought and introducing new topics. One may leave the impression of being a little confused, but the basic purpose of withholding the real answer can be accomplished.

One of the typical characteristics of "diplomatic" language is a certain subdued tone, some kind of understatement. It is correct to say that the real weight of words and terms in diplomatic professional jargon is much stronger than those same words in "normal" everyday speech. Just a few examples: the assistant minister of foreign affairs invites the ambassador of a neighboring country late in the afternoon to his office and expresses the "concern of his government over reporting in the ambassador's country's press which is not in harmony with the existing friendly relations between the two countries." Translated to standard language, this means "we believe that your government is encouraging unfriendly, even hostile, press against our country and in doing so you have passed the limits and I must warn you that we shall not tolerate it any more." The fact that the ambassador has been summoned to the ministry after office hours indicates that the local authorities consider the matter to be urgent and even beyond the regular framework of bilateral relations. If the minister adds that "he is afraid that the continuation of such practices might reflect negatively on relations between the two countries", it means that these relations are already disrupted (quite evidently, otherwise there would be neither unfriendly press nor sharp reactions on the other side), so that one could expect the postponement of an already agreed bilateral visit or signing of a bilateral cooperation agreement. If the minister states that he is afraid that "his government will not be able to control outbursts of anger in the media or restrain feelings in the parliament any more" the ambassador would not make a mistake in interpreting it as an announcement of a broad hostile campaign against his country, probably even of a fierce parliamentary debate with an utmost unfriendly charge.

There are several specialized formulations in the diplomatic language used in various fields of diplomatic activity, such as for the redaction of *communiqués* – "atmosphere of friendliness", "closeness of views", "complete openness", etc. – for negotiations (hence the difference between so-called soft and hard negotiators, although I recognize only the

distinction between good and bad ones!), for unofficial contacts outside of official premises and for informal occasions, for participation in international conferences, for the conclusion of international treaties, etc.

**Notes**

[1] It has been calculated that the translation of one single page to all official languages of the UN amounted to the value necessary to cover the cost of living for one person in India for a whole year! When one takes into account the number of international organizations, and the thousands of pages translated almost daily it is easy to subscribe to the proposal of introducing English as the language for international communication.

[2] The language of diplomacy, often like poetry, has the ability to move people from mood to mood. Whether used for demagogy or to give expression to noble ideologies, theories, or even religious creeds, ordinary language or that of diplomacy has a momentum and an inner driving force that is ageless.

[3] Not only by language but also by gestures, body language, smiles, frowns or grimaces is diplomat distinguished from other diplomats by his ways of communication. Some people sometimes speak with their face! Often, no answer is an answer, or perhaps a smile, a frown, a sneer or merely turning one's back on the speaker is a powerful way to communicate. Even the tone of how a thing is said is declamatory.

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