

## Stop! Listen! Learn! Language in Intercultural Communication

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**Abstract:** Ever since the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross/Comité International de la Croix-Rouge (CICR) in Geneva in 1863, state-sponsored international organizations (IOs) have continued to multiply and expand. From the 1960s on, non-governmental groups such as Amnesty International, Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) and Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have been surprisingly successful, and have prompted the establishment of hundreds of other voluntary international bodies. IOs now employ millions of people worldwide and engage hundreds of millions of others—the CICR alone has 97 million volunteers. This vast concert of activity, with its major centers in Oxford, Geneva, Paris, Rome, New York, Washington and Nairobi, is the most visible manifestation of global community in the 21st century. It's no secret that IOs that are not UN agencies (where six languages have official status) speak just one language. There's no prize for guessing what it is. What are the upsides and downsides of having just one language for the global community? What language is it that the global community really speaks? Can you even begin to understand another culture if you don't speak its language? There's no prize for guessing what the answer is. Stop! Learn! Listen!

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In July 2014 I took a group of American students to Chur (Coire) in Eastern Switzerland. We were the guests of the local radio and TV station, which broadcasts in a regional minority language, Romansch—the only one of Switzerland's four languages that is spoken nowhere outside the country. At the end of our tour we were honored with a talk about the current state of Romansch by the radio station's linguistic consultant. He began by asking in French if everyone understood French. Although all the students knew at least one language other than English, most of them did not know French. Good, said Professor Soler, I would like all you Americans to know what linguistic exclusion is. He carried on talking about the nature of a small language struggling to survive in an environment where everyone has to know the majority language (an Alemanic dialect of German called Schwyzerdutsch.) At first we thought Professor Soler was teasing. But he wasn't joking at all. In the course of the following hour he succeeded in giving those students an experience that is less and less common for L1 English speakers. The group understood more about intercultural communication by not comprehending Professor Soler than they could have gleaned had they known French perfectly. They now had no need to read Foucault to grasp what it means to say that language is power.

The group returned to its base in Geneva where one of the subsequent classes was a lecture on multilingual education in a city where in the playground of a large school you can hear up to one

hundred languages being spoken. It was given in French by a scholar from Quebec with a distinct regional accent. Simultaneous interpreting into English was provided by two advanced students at Geneva's Faculty of Translation and Interpreting. Our speaker gave a lively and dramatic presentation, and made no effort to adapt to the constraints of being interpreted. That's to say, she made natural movements with her hands and arms, moved around the classroom, went off topic from time to time, and addressed her listeners directly. It was a very enjoyable lecture for those who could comprehend what was being said. For students relying on the interpretation coming through their earpieces, however, and even for those who knew standard French but were unfamiliar with Canadian diction, it was baffling. The time lag of just a few seconds between the speaker's words and the English interpretation desynchronized her eloquent paralinguistic signaling and made it as incomprehensible as her out-of-cue PowerPoint slides. In verbal terms the interpreters provided a perfectly adequate rendering of what had been said, but their highly skilled services still left the audience feeling bewildered, excluded, and powerless. The students were predisposed to admire the interpreters and liked the idea of being treated as if they were international celebrities at a high-powered meeting, but the actual experience of being the receivers of simultaneous interpreting left them downcast. In a debriefing session they expressed shock as they realized that our most important global institutions—the institutions some of them would like to work for one day, the world bodies that try to keep the peace, to bring humanitarian relief, to standardize labor laws and practices, to promote world health and to respond to natural and man-made disasters—work through a fog of mediated, deferred, and approximate renderings. Conference interpreting is surely better than nothing, they agreed—but it disempowers most participants from engaging directly in the conversation.

Two things stand out here. The first is the pedagogic truism that comprehension and understanding are not synonymous. A colleague of mine once asked his students at the end of the year what was the main thing they had learned from his teaching. Among the dutiful answers was one honest one: that you should never jangle keys in your jacket pocket when talking to the blackboard. That's an example of understanding that is independent of linguistic comprehension. What the students in Switzerland understood—simply because they did not comprehend the lecture on Romansch or the lecture on multilingual education—was that language matters, and they understood it through the feelings of awkwardness, powerlessness, and exclusion, through the veritable oppression that the owners of a vehicular language exert on those without the requisite skills. This isn't news to residents of refugee camps in Kenya or Jordan whose vital prospects depend on interpreters working for the international aid workers from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or Oxfam. But it is news to hundreds of millions of people in the richer parts of the world who speak one of the tiny handful of the globe's major vehicular languages—including the global elite and those smart and already multilingual Princeton undergrads. Probably more than ever before in the history of the world, language is the key to the place that an individual, a community or a state can occupy in terms of power, prosperity, and freedom of action. It's a huge historical irony. Never before has so much been invested in levelling the global playing field through myriad intergovernmental and voluntary international organizations; never before has so much been spent on translation and interpreting services in every realm, from law courts to peacekeeping to patent protection; but never before has it mattered quite so

much what language you know.

In my book on the history and culture of translation, I wrote with admiration about the work of translators and the extraordinary skills of professional interpreters. My admiration remains undimmed, but there is a darker side that I would like to explore today. It's not at all contentious to say that there are some things translation cannot do, but the truth is worse than that: the fact is that translation and interpreting cannot do all that the developed world expects of them. However professionally it is done and however lavishly it is funded, translation cannot alter the relations of power that linguistic diversity creates and supports.

The language landscape of global relations in the twenty-first century has a fairly short and well-known history. Shocked by what he saw at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, Henri Dumont brought together a group of protestant philanthropists in his home town of Geneva to promote an idea he had—that medical personnel in war zones should be treated as neutral and be permitted to tend to the sick and dying irrespective of nationality. He called his idea “Red Cross”, inverting the white-cross-on-red-field flag of the Swiss Confederation, whose 1848 constitution committed it to permanent neutrality. The idea gained support with surprising speed. In 1864, delegates of twelve nations assembled in Geneva to sign a multilateral intergovernmental convention on the rules of war, which included recognition of medical personnel wearing the inverted Swiss flag symbol of neutrality. The Red Cross thereby became the first international organization. It was and remains a voluntary body funded by donations from private individuals. The International Committee of the Red Cross (CICR) located in Geneva coordinates the work of voluntary national Red Cross committees set up in each nation that have signed the convention. It has been a spectacular success. There are now approximately 100 million registered Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers in the world, and as many as 650,000 people are actively engaged in Red Cross work at any one time. Our question is this: how does the CICR conduct its vast business as far as communication, comprehension and understanding are concerned?

The administration of the Red Cross uses French. Its world headquarters remain in Geneva, where it was founded, so French is the native language of most of the 10,000 personnel directly employed by the CICR, from office cleaners to epidemiologists and computer analysts. But that is not the primary reason why French was adopted as the working language of the Red Cross. One hundred and fifty years ago, French served as the vehicular language for inter-state engagements of all kinds. Since the Red Cross sought to alter (in its own words, to civilize) the most brutal forms of engagement, it had to use the conventional language of European diplomacy, which was French.

Switzerland's constitutional neutrality and its location in between the major powers of the day made it a natural choice for other transnational organizations established soon after the Red Cross, but in response to different pressures and ideals. For example, the International Telegraph Union (ITU) took root in Berne in 1867, followed by the Universal Postal Union (UPU), which has become an agency of the UN and is therefore also based in Geneva. ITU and UPU naturally adopted French as their operating language (UPU eventually admitted English as a second official language, but only in 1994; airmail stickers, wherever you buy them in the world, still say *Par Avion*).

Alongside the neutrality of the Swiss Confederation, the French language is an integral part of the story of the growth of global institutions. But its initial advantage was also its main drawback.

It was the language of diplomacy because it was also the language of culture for the European elite. But just because it was the language of the elite, it aroused mistrust and hostility from many of the transnational political forces bubbling up in the ideological maelstrom of the late nineteenth century.

The global dominance of the British Empire and the rising power of the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not the main factors that made the maintenance of French as the single language of international action untenable. Throughout the world, especially in the Habsburg and Russian Empires, people were claiming the right to statehood on the basis of linguistic difference alone. For reasons that seemed at the time to be liberating but which in retrospect may be seen in a less positive light, the right to use a vernacular propelled demands for political autonomy and for statehood.

In Bialystok, a small town in the west of Russia (now Poland), an ophthalmologist by the name of Lejzor Zamenhof could see that if left unchecked the proliferation of official languages would lead to chaos. What was it that set Russians against Poles, Germans against Russians, and everybody against the Jews? Linguistic difference alone, which prevented understanding, which he mistook to be a lack of comprehension. He devised his own solution to the looming conflicts—an international language, *Internacia Lingvo*. He published his first introduction to it under the pseudonym of “Dr. Esperanto”—“hope” in the planned language that we now call Esperanto.

Esperanto is associated with no ethnicity, no territory, and no culture. It has a simple and regular orthography, morphology and word-formation rules, and very flexible word ordering. Zamenhof’s aim was not to supplant any existing language but to provide speakers of every language with an auxiliary tool for cross-linguistic communication. Could it have worked? Well, it certainly works as a living language. It has around 100,000 speakers today—more than at least half of the world’s 7,000 so-called natural languages—and a rich library of translated literature. In the early years of the twentieth century, a tiny sliver of disputed land squeezed between Germany, Belgium, and Holland, Moresnet, adopted Esperanto as its official language. The consequences of the international misunderstanding that led to the Great War gave Esperanto new impetus. By 1920 it was considered a serious contender for the pursuit of international cooperation and peace.

At the end of the Great War, Woodrow Wilson proposed fourteen points to be implemented by the peace treaties that redrew the map of Europe at Versailles and Trianon in 1919–1921. His fourteenth point was the establishment of a world forum to settle interstate disputes by peaceful means. The League of Nations met first in a London hotel but soon moved to Geneva, where it was staffed mainly by British and French civil servants. In 1922, the League considered adopting Esperanto as its working language (as the archives show, some of its committees had already taken that step). The proposal had wide support—but the French delegation opposed it energetically. In their view French already was the language of international cooperation, in the Red Cross, the ITU, the UPU, and several other international organizations that had sprung up in the meantime. Even if they did not formulate it in this way, they knew that retaining French as the working language would give French speakers the upper-hand in negotiations. However, the Americans mostly didn’t speak French. Although the USA failed to ratify the League of Nations, American power and influence was vital to the work it was doing, especially in its specialized agencies dealing with economics, health, and labor reform. The

compromise was to adopt English as an equal and parallel official language, and to have everything translated in both directions. Today's global language industry really began with decisions made in Geneva in 1922.

Esperanto lost because despite the goodwill and enthusiasm of many, it had no power base of its own. Moresnet had been gobbled up by Germany: the first and last Esperanto-speaking nation on earth had disappeared.

The League of Nations built a palace on a hillside overlooking the Lake of Geneva, but as an institution it faded away in the 1930s as political turmoil in Russia, Germany, Japan, and elsewhere overswept its polite parliamentary procedures. But as the Second World War drew to a close in 1944, it was clear to the Allied Powers that something of the same sort would be needed to ensure any postwar settlement. The United Nations, which held its first meeting in San Francisco in 1945, was structured rather differently and given larger tasks and greater resources, but it was the legal successor to the League of Nations and inherited its Swiss palace, its professional personnel, and its specialized agencies, which were bolstered and transformed into the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As the expression of the global role of the Allied victors of the Second World War, the UN expanded its range of official languages. French and English remained central, but Russian and Chinese had to be added. Spanish was included because several South American states had joined the Allied Powers in the closing stages of the war. That made five. Arabic was added in 1973 as a token response to the first oil crisis, and since 1980 the six languages have equal status as "official languages", and may be used as "working languages" too. The nominal distinction between "official language" and "working language" is a give-away. In fact, the UN secretariat in New York and Geneva are not multilingual institutions. They are bilingual, and use only French and English for internal administrative purposes.

The choice of the six official languages has nothing to do with their merits as languages, and not a great deal to do with the size of their language communities. It is true that English, Chinese, Arabic, French, Russian and Spanish are the first languages of perhaps 40% of the world's population, and in that sense they make reasonable choices as vehicular tools. But the long process of decolonization means that they are the official languages of more than 60% of the world's states, and that is a more important criterion. The population total could be significantly increased by substituting Hindi for French or Bengali for Russian, but either change would diminish the number of states represented—and states, not people, have the votes in intergovernmental organizations. There have been many proposals for altering or increasing the languages used at the UN, but to no avail. The German-speaking countries and Japan fund their own translation services in New York and Geneva, and other languages are used in the ILO and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), but the political obstacles to making any change in the list of six official UN languages remain insurmountable.

The system of simultaneous interpreting first devised for the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in 1945 was speedily adopted by the UN and its agencies. However, the service provided by interpreters falls far short of allowing complete engagement in an ongoing debate, as my students discovered. It's easier to handle an argument if you also understand the original, and the desirability of knowing one

of the two key languages—French and English—is obvious to anyone who has had occasion to work in an international institution. Russian, Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish are used on the podium and for the cameras; speedy written translation of documents in all the official tongues is provided, as a political priority; but in the cafeterias, committees, and corridors where real deals are hammered out, the languages of our global institutions are English and French. These are not the languages of the global majority. More significantly, they are not L1s for the vast majority of the hundreds of millions who are recipients of global intervention in peace-keeping, humanitarian relief, refugee support, or economic advice.

In the last fifty years, the UN has been supplemented by a proliferation of other international bodies, some of them regulatory (International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), for example), some of them intergovernmental (the European Union (EU) is the largest of these), but most of them voluntary, such as Oxfam and Doctors without Borders. Despite having origins in different parts of the world, these latter organizations have long accepted that their sole language of operation is English—international English, that is, English as spoken by L1 speakers of any number of other tongues. The irony is that international English now occupies the space for which Esperanto was originally designed. When used by non-native speakers, it is an international auxiliary language, and it has acquired those qualities of neutrality and flexibility that Zamenhof explicitly designed his *internacia lingvo* to have.

The existence of a world tongue, even if it wasn't planned as such, has done nothing to reduce chaos, conflict, and misunderstanding. The real lesson of the Esperanto experiment seems to me to be this: because it really works as a language, it can be used for the same purposes as any other tongue. You can swear, curse, insult, deceive, and lie in Esperanto as well as you can in Russian or Swahili. No language, constructed or inherited, local or widespread, is any better than any other at achieving human aims, which are not necessarily benign. Had Esperanto been used by the League of Nations from 1922, had it been re-adopted by the UN in 1945, had it been espoused by the voluntary organizations bringing relief and expertise to the disinherited of the earth since the 1970s—the state of our planet would still be very similar. Even the most fervent Esperantists have to admit that it wasn't Polish and Russian and German and Yiddish that lay at the root of the terrible conflicts of East Central Europe—it was Germans and Poles and Russians and Jews. The lesson of linguistic history is that all languages are neutral—but the people who use them are not. Had Esperanto achieved Zamenhof's aim of taking over as a global auxiliary tongue, its speakers nowadays would surely comprise the same group as the current speakers of international English. It would be the language of the educated global elites, not of the great mass of the people.

The result is worrying. We have sincere commitments to global governance and level playing fields, to global action and humanitarian relief, but we are trying to exercise them through the language hierarchy of a hundred years ago.

Many people think Esperanto is a ridiculous idea. The main objection to a planned language is that because it has no given place and no given constituency, it isn't a language at all. Behind the disparagement of planned languages lies the idea that in order to be a real language a form of speech must encode a culture and that a culture is the property of a geographically fixed set of people. This now familiar understanding of what a language is has shallow roots. It is an idea alien to the classical



cultures of Greece and Rome, and it was neither shared by the Catholic Church nor entertained in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. The seeds of linguistic ethnonationalism were planted by German Romanticism in the late eighteenth century and indirectly watered by the adventure of philology in the nineteenth century. In brief, the idea that a language is the foundation of a state and a vehicle of national culture is not as old as the steam engine.

It may not have much life left in it, either. It hardly corresponds to the present state of the world and the role that English plays in it. English cannot now be said to encode any specific national culture: it serves communities that are as different (and as internally diverse) as the USA, the UK, Australia, South Africa, and Jamaica. It is no longer rooted in a geographical area or in a way of life, since it serves in its international form as a vehicular tongue among elites from every ethnic group. If Esperanto is a ridiculous idea, English must be counted more so. But neither English nor Esperanto can serve Zamenhof's worthy but naïve ideal. Neither can make the world a more equal place, because that's not what languages do.

Just as one language can be used to express different cultures, so one culture can express itself in more than one tongue. Switzerland, the multilingual home of so many purportedly multilingual global institutions, has four languages, three of which (French, German and Italian) are also the national languages of neighboring states. In the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of language and nation, Switzerland is an impossible place. About twenty per cent of its population of eight million speak French, two-thirds of them speak dialectal German and write standard German, about one in ten speak Italian, and a few tens of thousands speak Romansch. Romansch speakers also have dialectal German, and nearly all Swiss Italian speakers can also manage in German or French. However, few French speakers can hold their own in German and most Swiss German speakers are not very fluent in French. Switzerland is a curious anomaly in modern Europe, but it also teaches us a vital lesson: how can you run a country with no single means of internal communication? Well, the Swiss can. What their example suggests is that the bond between language, culture, and nation that has justified so much strife in the last two hundred years is not as tight as all that—in fact, that it is an idea we could easily do without. The Swiss have no trouble being Swiss without a language to express Swissness. Like Esperanto, Swissness is a voluntary association based on shared ideals (but unlike Esperanto, one of those is a deep suspicion of outsiders). The Swiss have a firm understanding of what they're about without needing to comprehend precisely what fellow citizens are saying.

In many circumstances, of course, lack of comprehension is an obstacle to understanding. When delegates of the CICR visit a group of refugees in need of assistance and try to express themselves in one of their global languages—English or French—their words cannot be comprehended and their actions and presence are easily misunderstood. Unlike other IOs, the CICR does not use local interpreters, as their neutrality cannot be guaranteed. It also cannot employ only professional interpreters in all the languages spoken by the people it seeks to assist, because there are no careers for interpreters in most of those tongues. The CICR, like MSF and UNHCR, therefore has a permanent and pressing communication problem. Many of the noble efforts of these organizations go adrift because their message—their literal messages, and also the message of hope they bring—is prone to being mistaken and misunderstood.

Translation and interpreting, whether it takes place in the air-conditioned booths of the Palais des Nations or in the fly-blown tent camps of Kenya, is always an imperfect solution. It puts the recipient in a secondary and dependent place; it interferes with natural interaction between interlocutors; it arouses unverifiable but unavoidable suspicion that the message is being edited or mangled in the process. As my students discovered, it disempowers some and gives the upper hand to others. However skillfully it is done, however professional its practitioners, it is not a clear channel through which communication flows unimpeded.

There are three solutions: stop; listen, and learn. As L1 speakers of the global interlanguage, we should stop to wonder if what we say can always be heard. We should listen in to the earphones more often to experience being receivers of translation. The main solution, though, is to learn—to expand language education on a global scale, to spread it far beyond the teaching of English, and to bring it back home. If readers of this essay added just one language to their individual repertoires in the next three years—think how much more powerful IAIC would be at its next congress!

### Author Note

David Bellos is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Princeton University, where he also directs the Program in Translation and Intercultural Communication. He has translated many works of fiction by Georges Perec, Ismail Kadare, Fred Vargas and others, and is the author of a widely-read introduction to translation studies, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (Faber & Faber, 2011). He has written critical biographies of Georges Perec (1993), Jacques Tati (1999) and Romain Gary (2010) and is currently working on the global reception of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.