E-Learning and Multicultural, Multilingual Coexistence
In Search of Equitable Co-existence of Humankind in the
Developing Age of Information Technology

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Introduction

Discussion of globalization abounds. Here in the twenty-first century, an
environment is being forged that makes it impossible for a country to shut its doors to
the outside world, no matter how remote its location. Recently I made my first visit
to Bhutan, a small country in the southern foothills of the Himalayas. It once took six
days, on horseback and on foot, to reach the city of Paro. Now a flight from New
Delhi to Paro’s international airport takes only three hours. In my hotel room in the
capital, Thimphu, I found 20 TV channels, including NHK and CNN, laid on. That
made me keenly aware of how difficult it now is for any country to isolate itself from
the rest of the world.

In 1971, Bhutan made Dzongkha, a southern dialect of Tibetan, its official
language. That was the year it was admitted to the UN, and Bhutan was working
hard to establish an identity as a modern, independent nation-state. Establishing a
national language and making efforts to bring about its wider use were part of that
process. Bhutan stressed the importance of Dzongkha as the national language in
formal education and hoped to make it the language of instruction in place of English.
But at the same time Bhutan, as a member of international society, could not ignore
its need for English instruction in internationalization. English remains essential for
Bhutan’s contacts and interaction with international society. The absolute
dominance of English in television programming epitomizes the difficulties that
Bhutan faces in its efforts to foster its nascent Dzongkha-language culture. Bhutan’s
schools have been tasked with simultaneously achieving two missions, building a
nation-state and entering international society. Their solution, to ease the birth
pangs of nation-state formation, is to adopt bilingual education, in both Dzongkha and
English.

According to the Ethnologue database, 6,818 languages are presently spoken
somewhere in the world. Languages with a million or more speakers make up under 5
percent of the total, only 320 languages, while 450 have so few speakers they are on
the verge of extinction. Despite the homogenizing tendencies of the powerful tide of
globalization sweeping over world, however, there are still over 300 languages with
considerable spheres of currency. Some think that they are set if only they speak
English. But the UN, that most international of international institutions, has six official languages: not just English but also French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic. The UN also holds its meetings using interpreters. We should give full thought to what that means.

It was nearly twenty years ago, in 1983, that the World Conference on Cultural Policy was held in Mexico City. The arguments were complicated, and the heated discussions went on into the night, until the chairman suddenly announced a recess. The representatives of each country, caught up in passionate debate, were dumbfounded at his action, until, that is, the chair gently explained that the simultaneous interpreters were on the point of collapse. It was a medically necessary time out. That experience brought home to the participants how important the simultaneous interpreters are at international conferences.

To keep our discussion moving ahead, I would like now to reflect upon multiculturalism and multilingualism in the world today.

A multicultural, multilingual world

Let’s imagine we are traveling overland in India, from Calcutta to the Coromandel Coast. The Bengali script we became accustomed to seeing in the state of West Bengal vanishes when we enter the neighboring state of Orissa. There the curving lines of the Oriya script replace the more rectilinear shapes of Bengali. Moving further south, into Andhra Pradesh, we enter the world of the Dravidian languages, a language family unrelated to the Indo-European languages of North India. The language spoken in Andhra Pradesh is Telugu, which is written in its own rounded script. Continuing south, into the state of Tamil Nadu, we find that Tamil is its state language.

The same situation continues along the western coast. The state language of Gujarat is Gujarati, while Marathi is the state language of neighboring Maharashtra. Both belong to the Indo-European language family, but the next state to the south, Karnataka, takes us back to the world of Dravidian languages. Its state language is Kannada, a Dravidian language. Kerala, the southernmost state, also has a Dravidian state language, Kerala.

Indian rupees, reflecting the complexities of India’s linguistic map, indicate their value in 15 different scripts. English is widely used in Indian government administration as a quasi-official working language, but only approximately 2 percent of the Indian population is able to speak it. Even India, generally thought of as part of the English-speaking world, suffers from the “English divide.” Indeed, it may pose a more severe problem since India is assumed to be in the English-speaking world.

What, then, is the situation in China, with its 1.3 billion people? The government
is striving, through the school system, to expand the use of Putonghua. But the vast Chinese mainland is home to at least seven different mutually incomprehensible Chinese languages. Speakers of Shanghainese and of Cantonese cannot communicate with each other in their so-called “dialects.” Putonghua is, literally, “the national standard language,” created as a variant of what used to be called Mandarin, the language of Beijing officialdom. For everyday communication, however, people use their own languages, not Putonghua. In China, as in India, diglossia is the current state of affairs.

Linguistic variety is the rule for the nearly 600 million people who live in Southeast Asia as well. Excluding Indonesian and Malaysian, which are very similar, the main languages of the eleven Southeast Asian nations are largely unrelated to each other. Burmese, with its SOV structure, and Thai, a SVO language, have totally different linguistic structures. Laotian has six tones, Cambodian or Central Khmer, the official language of neighboring Cambodia, none. Vietnamese, while thought to be distantly related to Cambodian, does have tones. Vietnamese and Cambodian also use different scripts, but ignoring them and looking only at the spoken languages, we find they have almost nothing in common, since Vietnamese has borrowed considerable vocabulary from Chinese and Cambodian has extensive borrowings from Indian languages. In addition, Burmese, Thai, Laotian, and Cambodian are each written in different scripts; even numerals are written differently. Indonesia’s 200 million citizens share Bahasa Indonesia, the official language, but local languages remain so strong that, as in China, diglossia is the norm. In the Philippines, Tagalog has been renamed “Filipino” in an ongoing effort to make it into the national language, but there, too, local languages remain strong. In fact, “Taglish,” a creole engendered under the influence of the use of English in the Philippines since the end of the nineteenth century, is in common use as the true shared language.

**Language and Communication**

No matter how much one may stress the utility of nonlinguistic communication, nothing threatens the position of language. Communication without language is necessarily limited. And language is a cultural artifact. Even while one appreciates the position that advocates the study of the universal aspects of language in natural science terms, divorcing language from history and culture, actual linguistic activity undeniably occurs within specific languages, and actual speakers are unconsciously subject to the constraints imposed by those languages.

That is why a precondition for two speakers to communicate fully is that they share a synchronous consciousness of the language they are using. When Japanese say “mountain,” they associate “river” with it. Burmese associate “mountain” with “south,” while Thai may associate it with “not yet opened up.” The difficulty of
translating haiku, for example, arises from the overlapping of synchronous consciousness in the target language (English, for example) and the source language (Japanese).

When a shared second language is used as the medium for communication between speakers of different languages, an inescapable gap exists between the “native language,” the speaker’s mother tongue, and the shared language. The content of communication in the shared language is nothing more than an approximation of what the speakers want to say. When conducting a conversation using a natural language such as English as the shared second language, as is increasingly often the case, the speakers are required to operate within the paradigm of the English language. Even if we assume a multilingual, multicultural existence, we would err sadly if we avoided the thorny question of how to deal with the gap I have just described in considering how to achieve communication between different languages and cultures.

Communication between multiple languages and cultures usually uses one of several means:

1. Interpretation of speech
2. Translation of documents
3. Acquisition of another language
4. Use of an international lingua franca

In the case of use of interpretation or translation (options 1 or 2), the speaker remains within his or her own linguistic universe and tries to understand, in terms of his or her own language, what the other party is trying to communicate. In many cases the participants may not be aware of the discrepancy between the original message and the message as understood, and that frequently engenders misunderstandings. The resulting ever-present gap in awareness carries the risk that those relying on interpreters or translators tend to be too easily satisfied that they understand, when understanding has not really been achieved. For example, at the end of World War II, the Japanese military replaced the term for “defeat,” haisen, with “the end of hostilities,” shusen, and “retreat,” taikyaku, with “withdrawal,” tettai, creating an interpretation of the surrender far different from that of the Allies'. The third possibility, learning an alien language, requires considerable effort on the part of the person concerned. Even if known level of effort is needed, we cannot expect all people to make it. Thus, the fourth option, using a third language as a
lingua franca, is the simplest. But with it we cannot avoid setting off a "Lingua Franca Divide," on the order of the "Digital Divide," as we saw in the case of India. At the same time, we must also not forget that using a lingua franca does not solve the problem of linguistic gaps. In fact, it entails necessarily ignoring the unavoidable gap that exists between one's own language and the shared language, as pointed out above.

The Development of E-Learning

The development of E-Learning in recent years permits a dramatic expansion in the scope of people who can be reached by formal education, and, if we can set aside the problem of the Digital Divide for the moment, is a very welcome development. Computer literacy has been rising at a rapid pace in recent years among Japanese at every educational level—primary, and junior and senior high school. Viewing that state of affairs in Japan, we can readily predict that E-Learning, using Internet technologies, will become increasingly important as a means of delivering education to a wide range of people. The issue I would like to raise in connection with the topic of this symposium is the linguistic environment of the Internet technologies that are the precondition for E-Learning.

In the past twenty years, Japanese-language typewriters have become museum pieces. Use of a roman-letter keyboard has become general, and production of Japanese documents by conversion to kana and kanji after inputting in roman script has become a matter of course. At least in terms of scripts, the roman-letter keyboard can be used to express in writing almost all the scripts used in the world. In particularly, in the late 1990s, there was a conspicuous drive to build multilingual computing environments. It is utterly delightful that it has become possible to use a Japanese personal computer to compose e-mail messages in Russian, using Cyrillic script, and in Chinese, using Chinese characters, and send them to Russia and China.

But such communication is possible only when the people talking to each other share a common language. If one of them is a speaker of another language, the acquisition of the language used in communication is a precondition for communication. But it is, for practical purposes, nearly impossible to ask that everyone to do so. Thus, as I mentioned earlier, the interpolation of simultaneous interpreters has been used to achieve a level communication playing field at the UN.

Given these circumstances, it may be that international communication, which is becoming even more convenient with the development of IT, should go in the direction of considering how it can build an environment in which a speaker of one language can communicate with a speaker of another language without leaving the
linguistic environment of his or her national language. Specifically, that would mean the development of sophisticated machine translation technologies. Machine translation research began with the very birth of computers and continues today. But its pace of development seems slow, compared with the rate at which other IT technologies have developed. Since it would require a huge investment of funds and human talent to move machine translation along faster, it is understandably difficult to develop a rationale justifying the continuation of research on machine translation. Nonetheless, I would like to point out the scale of the problem presented by the fact that the linguistic space of the Internet is almost entirely an English-language space. While not wanting to support linguistic nationalism as such, I would consider the meaning of the French stance in rejecting the common expression “computer,” which was becoming widespread, in favor of the coined term “ordinateur.”

Multilingualism and multiculturalism have occurred in the course of human history. It is arguably an historical necessity that the need to connect multiple linguistic spaces gives rise to a lingua franca that is used as a means of communication. I would not deny the fact that in the twenty-first country, English is becoming the international lingua franca. But what I would like to emphasize here is that highly developed IT technologies may have the potential to create new means to conquer multilingual spaces. The investment needed to develop those means, in funds and human talents, may be enormous, but, looking at the situation in terms of human history, I think that we can assert that the goal is worth the expense. When we consider the significance in terms of human history of developing machine translation or other technologies to conquer multilingual spaces, we must see that the stakes in developing this aspect of IT technologies are high indeed.

**Conclusion**

We do not know where the development of IT technologies will take us. Among the possible outcomes, which would be very desirable indeed, are an expansion of the freedom of expression that is the bedrock of democracy and the fuller integration of our all-too-divided world. But we must remember that not all outcomes of globalization are good. It is a valid criticism, not to be lost sight of, that “globalization” as we are experiencing it does not mean aiming for a true sharing of universals, eternal values; in reality, it is the spread of the values and interests of the great powers and their coerced acceptance by the rest of the world.

It is handy, for those who have studied English, that the Internet space is an English-language space. And, having already invested in learning English, we tend to think that the effort or sacrifices necessary to participate in that space are not too great. Stating one’s doubts about the English-language domination of the Internet
may expose one to criticism for retrograde thinking, from the point of view of efficiency. But as I noted at the beginning of these remarks, the real world is multicultural and multilingual. All languages and cultures are valuable in themselves; they are the contexts in which human beings’ lives are lived. They are, I would argue, too precious to be ignored in the name of efficiency.

People at UNESCO are engaged in a passionate discussion about what to do about endangered languages—languages on the verge of extinction. The core of my argument is the need to find a method that will permit communication in a multicultural, multilingual world, adopting a position in between “rescue endangered languages” and “use English as the global language.” Will the almost too swift development of IT technologies mean that the effort to achieve co-existence in a multicultural and multilingual world is brushed aside in the name of greater efficiency? The claims of efficiency are superficially persuasive. Still, I hope with all my heart that the deeper significance of respecting cultural and linguistic differences and fostering communication in our multicultural, multilingual world will be recognized.