

The Fifth International Conference of English as a Lingua Franca

Problems Related to the Concept of Lingua Franca*

May 24, 2012

Güzver Yıldiran

Abstract

Problems related to the concept of 'Lingua Franca' are discussed. The need to disassociate English as the lingua franca of the era from unilateral transactions protecting the choices of the present power structure is stressed.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, Power structures

My International Colleagues and Dear Guests,

I think both Istanbul and Boğaziçi University are indeed appropriate places to discuss issues related to the concept of 'lingua franca', because both the city and the university have histories of multi-cultural heritages. Please allow me to say welcome, not in English as the lingua franca, but in my native language, "Hoşgeldiniz". I am grateful to the Department of Foreign Language Education of the Faculty of Education for the organization of this meaningful event, as well as to all of you participating in the attribution of meaning to such an important gathering, which hopefully will contribute to more humane relations and understanding across boundaries.

Coming from the area of social sciences, and not linguistics, I would like to share with you what might seem rather simplistic, and yet **what a social scientist might view as important and/or problematic**, concerning the concept of 'lingua franca'. What may be some questions related to the concept from the standpoint of a social scientist? **One would be interested in the origins of the concept**, when it was first used; **whether it emerged out of local and regional needs or more universal demands**; **what served as lingua francas in history**; **what were the factors behind the changes in languages which functioned as the lingua franca of different eras**; **what were the relations of the concept to the power structures of the region**, or as **in the case of English, its relation to world structures**; and whether the notion of 'lingua franca' implies the need to communicate with and to people who use different languages, indicative of **equilateral human relations and communication**, or whether 'lingua franca' as a concept holds **within its boundaries the issue of cultural superiority and homogenization of diversity**. I cannot respond to these questions; however, **the immense set of tacit problems behind each of these, traces itself to consciousness**. Of course, as a social scientist, I have my own hypotheses for these questions.

It seems that the term 'lingua franca' **originated** from the words **Phrankoi in Greek** during the later Roman Empire, and **Faranji in Arabic** during the Crusades. In both cases, **contact with the 'other' seems to have occurred primarily through conquests and wars**. **In both Greek and Arabic all Western Europeans, with whom encounters necessitated a semantic tag, were called Franks**.

There are many **regional lingua francas** throughout history. These seem **to have emerged out of the practical need to communicate primarily through trade, as well as being the result of contact through war**. Among the languages, which in broad sweeps **evolved chronologically into regional lingua francas** are **Chinese, the Turkic languages, Greek, Persian, Latin, Arabic, Ottoman, Spanish, French, German and Russian**.

An instrumental 'lingua franca' **for commerce and diplomacy emerged through the Mediterranean** around the time of the **Renaissance**. It was **not a single language but a mixture of several languages** including **Ottoman, Italian, French, Arabic, Greek, Spanish and Portuguese**. The **composition of this language alludes to the commercial and diplomatic relations as well as the operating power structures around the Mediterranean** at the time. **At the height of the Ottoman Empire, eastern Ottoman ports and the Italian**

*The Opening Speech of the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Boğaziçi University

and Spanish seaborne access to these ports, where goods were transported from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, defined the commercial relations of the time. For the trading cultures, instrumental usage of language related to the exchange of goods must have become a functional necessity. It would be interesting to study the composition of this mixed language. The following questions emerge apropos of this particular 'lingua franca'. Were there discernible linguistic patterns in the usage of these different languages? If so, were these patterns aligned with the sources of the goods? Was there any reflection of diplomatic supremacy in the usage of semantic linguistic patterns of this mixed language?

Around the 17th up to the mid-20th centuries, French serves as the lingua franca of European diplomacy. The first record dates to the peace negotiations of 1678 in Nijmegen, where French was used among French, Spanish and Swedish diplomats. This, then, became a model for European Diplomacy, where Académie Française actively promoted the use of French. Even in Russian courts, the usage of French became a sign of culture and refinement.

The second set of examples I would like to share is related to the unilateral usage of 'lingua franca' as a means of the colonization process. Geographical and political power structures permeate cultural settings in the case of colonization, where not only natural but also human resources of the colonized geography serve only the stipulations of the colonizers. The lingua francas of the colonization process serve at two levels with opposite value schemes; of unquestionable superiority for the colonizers on the one hand, and the imposed inferiority for the colonized, on the other. The same power structure in the use of English, for example in India and Africa; French in Africa, and Dutch in Indonesia can be instrumentally evaluated around similar principles of the use of political power over geographies, which are far away from the seat of such power. In these instances of history, the lingua franca of the era is certainly instrumental in establishing power relations and their implied transactions, only for the benefit of the colonizers.

Coming to the east, we see Chinese as the lingua franca of diplomacy until the beginning of the 20th century in Far East Asia, again related to size, political prowess and economic status. Arabic was the lingua franca of the Arab Islamic Empire from the 8th century to 1492, covering geographical areas from China, North India, Central Asia, Persia, Asia Minor, the Middle East, North Africa, Spain and Portugal. From the perspective of a social scientist, it would be very curious to investigate the usage of eastern versus western lingua francas, and the value structures surrounding both sets.

There are also purposive content area lingua francas, such as Italian for the arts, French for ballet, Arabic for Islamic studies, and Latin for medicine. How does a purposive content area lingua franca differ from others in terms of learning motivation, and bilateral power exchanges? This would also be of great interest to the social scientist.

Coming to English as the 'lingua franca' of post Second World War world, no one would argue about the need for a shared language for political, economic, cultural and sportive transactions, when communication through technology has broken almost all barriers of time and space, as well as barriers of national, institutional, and personal privacy. Except for the French and Francophones, few would also argue that the most probable candidate has to be English, due to the present unipolar, not unified power structure of the world, where the United States of America is the key actor due to its economic and political status and influence.

However (and there is reason for this however), will English as the lingua franca of the era be a neutral language of world transaction, serving instrumentally world peace with justice and equity for all parties, or will the transactions only protect the choices of the present power structure? This is indeed a pertinent question, and to which the response is not readily available in an optimistic political framework. Another question is what happens to cultural diversity and the right to cultural heritages, when technology threatens differences and permeates cultural and individual lives with models of life-styles rooted in the culture of the lingua franca.

I do not know the answers to these questions. But until the lingua franca necessary for communication and transaction across cultures stops being partial to the origin of the lingua franca, and strips itself from unilateral supremacies, it will not merit the value of a shared language that promotes and preserves human dignity across the wonderfully diverse and enriching cultural orientations, and their historical heritage.

As I leave you with these questions, let me welcome you once more to my country, city and university, and share my hopes for an enhancing exchange of knowledge and ideas during the conference.

References

- Anderman, G. and Rogers M. (2005). English in Europe: For better, for worse. In *Translating Europe: In and out of English*; Gunilla Anderman & Margaret Rogers (Eds.). Great Britain; Cromwell Press Ltd., 1–26.
- Multatuli (1900). *Verzamelde werken: II, minnebrieven, over vryen-arbeid in Nederlandsch Indie, indrukken van den dag*. Amsterdam: Uitgevers-maatschappij “Elsevier”.
- Multatuli (1900). *Verzamelde werken: IV, nog-eens: Vrye-arbeid in Nederlandsch Indie, Multatuli en zijne werken geschetst*. Arnheim-Nijmegen: E. Gebrs, & M. Cohen.
- Said, E.W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Book.

Ortak İletişim Dili Olarak İngilizce Kavramına İlişkin Sorunlar

Özet

Makalede ‘Ortak İletişim Dili’ (Lingua franca) kavramına ilişkin sorunlar tartışılmaktadır. Günümüzün ortak iletişim dili olan İngilizce’yi mevcut güç yapılarına ait tercihleri koruyan tek taraflı işlevlerden ayırmanın önemi vurgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Ortak iletişim dili olarak İngilizce, Güç yapıları