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LANGUAGE INEQUALITY AND
DISTORTION IN
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
A CRITICAL THEORY APPROACH

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LANGUAGE INEQUALITY

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VII:7

Yukio Tsuda

*Language Inequality and Distortion in Intercultural Communication
A Critical Theory Approach*

*To Noriko, Michiko, and my mother
for everything*

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August 1986
Yukio Tsuda

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INTRODUCTION

We live in the age of the global community where international and intercultural exchanges of products as well as ideas and values are an essential part of life. These exchanges have been welcomed by most peoples of the world, and will probably be further promoted. However, when we take a critical look at these activities, we discover many forms of inequality. Inequality arises in the form of the dominance of certain languages over all others in international and intercultural communication. For example, the United Nations recognizes only six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Moreover, the working languages for the United Nations' documentation are limited to English, French, Russian, and Spanish. In most international and intercultural activities, Western languages, especially English, and to a lesser degree, French, are dominant, and the mastery of these languages is now an essential requirement for anyone wishing to become an active member of international and intercultural activities. This linguistic situation suggests that while native speakers of these few Western languages can communicate their values and viewpoints with maximum comfort and freedom, the people of other languages are forced to suffer psychological as well as communicative difficulties.

Communicative inequality occurs in a variety of intercultural and international activities including international politics, education, science, the world mass media, and others. In the United Nations, forty percent of the Member States, and thirty percent of the United Nations' population are denied the use of their own languages (Harry and Mandell 1979: 21). Also, the International Whaling committee adopted English as its official language and forbids the use of other languages, which handicaps the non-English-speaking representatives and prevents them from fully participating in the discussion (Futatsugi 1981: 34-35). In education, English has become a dominant language of instruction in large parts of the world, thus imposing a burden of learning an extra language upon the non-English-speaking students. Some statistics illustrate this point. Seventy-six percent of all secondary school students in the non-English-speaking world, excluding China, are

studying English (Tonkin and Edwards 1981: 95). In Western Europe, of all the foreign language learners, 98 percent of the West Germans, 90 percent of the Dutch, 81 percent of the French, and 56 percent of the Italians learn English as a second language (Tonkin and Edwards 1981: 95). In the former British colonies, the imposition of English still continues, so that in India, children are forced to learn at least three languages: English, Hindi, and a regional dialect. Too much time is spent on language learning, and too little time on the substance, so that a sociologist deplores the fact that "they are being miseducated" (Goldthorpe 1975: 91). Also, in some high schools in the United States, linguistic insecurity is inflicted upon the speakers of non-standard English through the implementation of the English language tests as a requirement for graduation (Hymes 1983).

The dominance of English in international scientific activities is also so enormous that it prevents the non-English-speaking scientists from fully realizing their potentials and opportunities. For example, a Japanese anthropologist expressed his dissatisfaction with an international conference of anthropologists held in Chicago, saying that it was a Western-language-biased conference, because the translations were available only for English, German, French, Russian, and Spanish (Hirano 1979: 46). The Czech chemist Novobilsky reported on an international chemistry conference where the American (U.S.A.) scientists dominated the lecture and question-and-answer sessions, and often got their viewpoints accepted due to their greater mastery of English (Sherwood 1983a). Sherwood (1979) also maintains that success in international science today is conditioned by the ability to speak and write English. An editor for a scientific journal gives an account of his experience of rejecting a research paper written in English by non-English-speaking scholars for the reason that their English was not good enough (Maul 1983). Likewise, Tonkin (1979) maintains that even the best scientist of a non-English-speaking country will be linguistically and rhetorically out-classed by native speakers of English in international conferences.

Communicative inequality also develops in the world mass media in the form of a monopoly on communication channels and information sources mainly by the English-speaking nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Most international news originates from the three news agencies located in the United States and the United Kingdom, namely: Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), and Reuters. The content of the news disseminated by these agencies is concerned mostly with the Western culture and politics (Turnstall 1977: 29). The monopoly of satel-

lite communications system and space communications systems by the United States is documented (Schiller 1970 and 1976; Larson 1984). In film and book exports, the English-language products dominate throughout the world: about one-third to almost half of the movies being watched by the world are American-made, and about forty percent of the books translated into other languages are originally written in English (UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1983).

The dominance of a few languages in international and intercultural communication often creates serious consequences in almost all spheres of human activities, always handicapping the people of minority languages. A Chinese immigrant to the United States, for example, was confined in a mental hospital for thirty-one years because of "the incomprehensible English" he spoke (Free at last, 1984). A psychological study reports that in the United States a non-English-speaking defendant in a court trial is usually disadvantaged because "language constraints leave the jury with an unwarranted poor impression of the defendant" (Andrews 1984: 30). Also, language is an instrument of social classes and stratification. In most colonized nations of Asia and Africa, the European languages continue to reign as a prestigious language used by an upper-class people. In Hong Kong, a former British colony, speakers of English are considered to be the first-class citizens, while speakers of Chinese, the second-class.

Thus, all these cases indicate that many people, especially from the non-Western world, are prevented from enjoying equal opportunities of engaging in international and intercultural activities. Obviously, some people greatly benefit from this situation, while others are victimized, often being deprived of the freedom of expression and perception in their own language. This is the problem I would like to address in this study: the language inequality in which a person is deprived of the freedom of expression and perception in his/her own language as a result of the imposition of certain dominant language(s) in communication.

Despite the seriousness of the language inequality problem, the experts in language and communication studies do not pay much attention to it. Although intercultural communication scholars include language as a factor that effects the process of intercultural communication, they typically argue that cultural problems are more important than language problems (Prosser 1978: 102), and fail to address the language problems sufficiently. Sociolinguistics has developed into a primary discipline to deal with language problems such as bilingualism, linguistic variations, and language planning, and

has come up with a large number of excellent studies done by Fishman, Labov, and Hymes. However, most sociolinguists are preoccupied with collecting and objectively describing the linguistic data, and fall short of interpreting it critically. Social psychology of language is a growing discipline organized to study problems such as bilingualism, language and identity, and linguistic accommodation. It attempts to provide an explanation for human verbal behavior by using social psychological theories. Lambert first developed social psychological studies of language through the use of experimental method, and more recently, Giles and his associates further developed their research by doing considerable amount of studies. Still, experimental methodology which imposes artificial and controlled environments on the subjects is often the target of criticism.

Thus, the three disciplines of language and communication are unable to provide a critical perspective in which to explore the language inequality problem, because these disciplines value scientific neutrality and objectivity so much that they refrain from taking a certain theoretical position in their endeavors. Instead, I have chosen the Critical Theory perspective as a theoretical framework, because it provides a critical perspective in which to describe, define, and interpret the problems of language inequality in international and intercultural communication.

1. CRITICAL THEORY APPROACH TO LANGUAGE INEQUALITIES

Despite the fact that language and language-based issues are investigated by various fields of study, there is no especially comprehensive theoretical framework by which to examine the language inequalities critically. The need is felt for an adoption of a philosophical position that can effectively address the problem of language inequalities. In this chapter, I present the following topics in an attempt to establish a Critical Theory position by which I shall explore the language inequality issues in international and intercultural communication.

The topics included are as follows:

- (1) Critical Theory and Scientific Inquiries
- (2) A Critique of the Positivist Approach
- (3) An Exposition of Critical Theory
- (4) A Critical Theory Approach to Language Inequalities

1.1. Critical theory and scientific inquiries

Critical Theory can be characterized first by what it is against, or critical of, rather than by that of which it is supportive. The critical analysis is directed not only toward industrialized capitalist societies, but also toward the scientific community as well. Lanigan (1981) explains specifically how Critical Theory is thematic:

“While originally a calculated attack on philosophic and scientific positivism, critical theory now has become a questioning of, and qualitative approach to, the study of communication in a world dominated by quantitative methodologies and the social perspective of an advanced industrial society modeled on the United States”. (p.142)

While a detailed discussion of a critique of the positivist approach is presented in the next section, I would like to briefly introduce the basic arguments of Critical Theory as developed by Jürgen Habermas and Terence

Schroyer so that we have some idea of what type of scientific inquiry Critical Theory is in comparison with other types of scientific inquiries.

Habermas (1968/1972), in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, presents three different processes of inquiry. Habermas provides a typology of scientific inquiries according to "cognitive interests" incorporated in each science. These sciences are (1) Empirical-Analytic Sciences which incorporate technical cognitive interests; (2) Historical-Hermeneutic sciences which incorporate practical cognitive interests; and (3) Critical sciences which incorporate emancipatory cognitive interests. Empirical-Analytical sciences refer to positivist sciences whose main cognitive interests are to explain, predict and control through the practice of a hypothetico-deductive scientific inquiry. Historical-Hermeneutic sciences refer to the interpretive sciences which aim to preserve culture and tradition. Thus, the cognitive interests of Historical-Hermeneutic sciences are practical. Habermas is severely critical of these two forms of scientific inquiry because of their objectivist attitudes:

"Guided by the objectivist attitude of theory as the image of facts, the nomological and hermeneutical sciences reinforce each other with regard to their practical consequences. The latter displace our connection with tradition into the realm of the arbitrary, while the former, in the levelled-off basis of the repression of history, squeeze the conduct of life into the behavioral system of instrumental action". (Habermas 1968/1972: 316)

Schroyer (1970), another Critical Theorist, focuses his criticism on positivist-based contemporary science and technology which have developed into technocratic legitimation today. He maintains that technocratic legitimation assumes a positivist view of science which holds:

- (1) that knowledge is inherently neutral
- (2) that there is a unitary scientific method
- (3) that the standard of certainty and exactness in the physical sciences is the only explanatory model for scientific knowledge (Schroyer 1970: 210).

He calls these three claims "scientism", and argues that scientism justifies and encourages technical interests so that instrumentality and efficiency become highly valued in society over practical and emancipatory interests. The uncritical acceptance of science and technology has resulted in a blind faith in technocratic society. Schroyer further argues that:

"the faith that men will be emancipated through the extension of neutral techniques of science and technology obscures the reality of research-serving

and justifying technical control systems that accept power structures as given". (p.211)

That is to say, the faith in objectivity and the neutrality of science and technology eventually turns into a faith in legitimation of existing institutions.

Critical sciences are very critical of the scientism of the Empirical-Analytic sciences. Motivated by emancipatory cognitive interests, the Critical sciences aim to construct an emancipatory society where a person can attain autonomy and is free from domination. Critical Theorists believe that activities in scientific inquiry are parallel to the practice of life itself in that both are affected by interests a person or a scientist has. That is, the process of scientific inquiry — cognitive enterprise — is always affected by the interests of a scientist or society. Therefore, such cognitive activities are never neutral, and therefore scientific knowledge derived from such activities is never neutral either, implying that there should be different scientific inquiries that are motivated by different interests. In short, Critical Theory is a theoretical enterprise to demand diversification in research practices and emancipation of people from domination. Namely, it is a subjective revolt of human consciousness against the objectivism of science and technology.

1.2. A critique of the positivist approach

A critical examination of the so-called positivist empirical research prevalent especially in the United States social science community started in the late 1960's. Lanigan (1981) sees the root of such a critical view in the 1969 Conference of the European Association of Experimental Psychology held in Belgium. He quotes from Tajfel and Israel's *The Context of Social Psychology: A Critical Assessment* (1972):

"On the one hand, there was genuine respect for much that has been achieved through the well-tried methods of clear-cut empirical hypotheses and their experimental testing. On the other hand, many felt that an unquestioned acceptance of the assumptions — social, scientific and philosophical — underlying much of this research was a heavy price to pay for achieving a modicum of "scientific respectability" and even for making *some* gains in knowledge. It is possible that the "student revolution" very much in evidence in the spring of 1969 — had something to do with these conflicts". (Israel and Tajfel 1972: 2, quoted in Lanigan 1981: 143)

Before presenting a critique of positivist empirical research, let us find its origin and basic premises. Polkinghorne (1983) traces the beginning of positivist empirical investigation to the Middle Ages when the craft guilds