

Speaking Peace: The Role of Multilingualism and Translation in Conflict Resolution Negotiations

How do language and communication practices- especially multilingualism, translation and second language use- affect the dynamics, outcomes, and framing of peace negotiations and conflict resolutions in international relations.



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By Rea Alba Mehra

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I, Rea Alba Mehra, confirm that the work for the following thesis with the title:

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Signature

Rea
Alba

Executive Summary:

This thesis investigates how language- specifically multilingualism, translation and second language use- shapes emotional perception in international negotiations. Whilst much of the existing literature review focuses on cultural differences and native language framing, this study asks a more pointed question: What happens when negotiations do not take place in anyone's native tongue? What is lost or transformed when emotionally charged terms are used in a second language, especially in high stakes political settings?

This research draws on Raymond Cohen's foundational theory that different cultures interpret escalation related terms differently, with some words like "compromise" or "honor" considered far more provocative in certain regions. However, Cohen's research was based on reactions in native languages. This thesis updates and challenges that framework by testing how multilingual speakers respond to such terms in English- a second or third language for most respondents. Whilst Cohen's theory assumed that emotional reaction is culturally fixed, this suggests it is also shaped by the language medium itself.

To explore this, two research methods were used: a multilingual focus group and a quantitative survey completed by 101 respondents (sent out originally to 124 individuals) from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The focus group discussed emotional interpretation, translation issues, and cultural associations tied to negotiation language. The survey asked participants to rate 13 conflict related terms on a scale of 1-7 based on their perceived likelihood to escalate tension in negotiations. All responses were given in English to isolate the effect of second language processing.

The key finding is that English, when used as a second language, appears to soften emotional responses. Many words previously flagged as escalatory in Cohen's work were interpreted more neutrally. "Compromise" in particular which was originally flagged as problematic in Cohen's study revealed no statistically significant escalation in any group. Instead, only 3 words- Betrayal, Delay and surrender- triggered strong cross linguistic variation. These results suggest that using a second language (in this case English) may dampen and soften emotional intensity- creating a more emotionally distanced negotiation space. This raises practical and ethical questions about how diplomatic language is perceived and interpreted, especially when one party negotiates in a non native language.

To help frame these findings, this thesis proposes a 5 part Multilingual Escalation Awareness Framework (MEAF) which identifies key variables: the language medium, translation process, political, framing and delivery and speaker awareness. The MEAF serves as a practical tool for diplomats and mediators to assess where emotional gaps or misunderstandings may arise due to language use.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to both theory and practice. It challenges the assumption that cultural emotional responses are stable across all languages and shows that second language use is a variable that deserves more attention in negotiation research. By testing Cohen's ideas through a linguistic rather than purely cultural lens, this study signs with Barragan Diaz's work which revealed that second language negotiation tends to reduce emotional weight. These insights carry direct implications for diplomacy, peacebuilding and translation ethics in international relations.

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