

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND MULTILINGUALISM: LANGUAGE AS A BRIDGE FOR GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING

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I. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world marked by migration, technological acceleration, geopolitical tensions, and cultural polarization, cultural diplomacy and multilingualism have emerged as critical instruments for fostering peace, mutual understanding, and international cooperation. Language is far more than a system of communication; it is a carrier of memory, identity, worldview, heritage, and social belonging. Likewise, cultural diplomacy extends beyond traditional statecraft, operating as a form of soft power that builds trust and intercultural dialogue through education, heritage, arts, language exchange, and collaborative global initiatives.

Organizations such as UNESCO have played a central role in promoting multilingualism and intercultural communication as foundations for sustainable peace and global citizenship. Through programs involving heritage preservation, language revitalization, intercultural education, and international cooperation, UNESCO demonstrates how language and culture function as strategic tools of diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

This article explores the relationship between cultural diplomacy and multilingualism, examines UNESCO initiatives that exemplify these principles, and analyzes how multilingual competence contributes to international understanding, peacebuilding, and global leadership.

II. CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: BEYOND TRADITIONAL DIPLOMACY

Cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, languages, and artistic expressions among nations and peoples to strengthen mutual understanding and international relations. Unlike conventional diplomacy, which often focuses on political negotiations and state interests, cultural diplomacy operates through human connection, symbolic exchange, and intercultural engagement.

Scholar Joseph Nye introduced the concept of “soft power,” describing the ability of nations to influence others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Culture, language, education, and values become instruments capable of shaping international perceptions and cooperation.

Language occupies a central role in these processes because diplomacy itself depends fundamentally on communication and interpretation. Misunderstandings between cultures are frequently rooted not only in linguistic

differences but also in divergent cultural frameworks, symbolic meanings, and historical narratives.

III. MULTILINGUALISM AS CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

Multilingualism is increasingly recognized not merely as a technical skill but as a form of cultural intelligence. Research in psycholinguistics and cognitive science demonstrates that multilingual individuals often develop greater cognitive flexibility, empathy, perspective-taking abilities, and intercultural sensitivity (Bialystok, 2011).

Each language carries distinct conceptual structures and cultural assumptions. Speaking multiple languages allows individuals to navigate different social realities and cultural perspectives more effectively. In diplomacy and international cooperation, this capacity becomes especially valuable.

UNESCO and the Promotion of Multilingualism

UNESCO has consistently emphasized multilingualism as a cornerstone of cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence. Since its founding in 1945, UNESCO has advocated for linguistic inclusion, intercultural education, and cultural preservation as mechanisms for international peacebuilding.

One of UNESCO's most influential initiatives is International Mother Language Day, celebrated annually on February 21. Established in 1999, the observance promotes linguistic diversity and multilingual education worldwide.

UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Programme safeguards living cultural expressions including oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, social practices, and traditional knowledge systems. Language plays a crucial role in intangible cultural heritage because oral transmission is often the primary method through which traditions survive across generations.

Translation and Interpretation as Invisible Diplomacy

Translation and interpretation occupy a unique position within cultural diplomacy. Interpreters often function as

invisible mediators between cultures, facilitating communication in contexts ranging from international summits to humanitarian crises.

Translation scholar Eugene Nida emphasized the importance of "dynamic equivalence," arguing that effective translation must preserve cultural meaning rather than merely substituting words between languages (Nida, 1964).

Personal Reflection: How This Research Relates to My Background

This study reflects not only an academic and professional interest but also my own lived experience as a multilingual global citizen working at the intersection of diplomacy, language, heritage, and intercultural communication.

As someone born in Brazil and educated across Switzerland, Europe, Asia, and the United States, I have personally experienced how language shapes identity, belonging, worldview, and human connection. Living in multilingual environments from a young age exposed me to the complexities of intercultural communication long before I formally studied international relations and diplomacy.

My professional work as a multilingual interpreter, journalist, educator, cultural diplomacy specialist, and global program leader has reinforced the reality that language is one of humanity's most powerful diplomatic tools. Across more than 65 countries, I have witnessed how multilingual communication can build trust where political language alone often fails.

IV. BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Beatrice de Salles is a Global Affairs and Cultural Diplomacy Specialist, multilingual interpreter, international journalist, educator, and cultural heritage advocate with more than twenty years of experience in intercultural communication and global leadership. She holds an M.A. in International Relations & Global Communication from Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado (FAAP) in São Paulo, Brazil, and a B.A. in Cultural Studies & Languages from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey in California, United States.

Beatrice has lived, studied, or worked across Europe, Asia, Latin America, and

North America, and has professional experience spanning more than 65 countries. Her work integrates diplomacy, multilingualism, intercultural education, journalism, translation, heritage preservation, and international cooperation.

V. CONCLUSION

Cultural diplomacy and multilingualism are deeply interconnected forces shaping the future of global cooperation. In a world increasingly affected by polarization and misunderstanding, language serves not merely as communication but as a pathway toward empathy, recognition, and peaceful coexistence.

UNESCO's initiatives demonstrate that preserving linguistic diversity and promoting intercultural dialogue are not symbolic gestures; they are strategic investments in sustainable peace and human dignity.

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