Meeting on Removal of Language Barriers
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FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR
SPECIAL CO-OPERATION PROJECTS

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I. WHAT ARE LINGUISTIC BARRIERS

Linguistic barriers represent an important aspect of language research today, and rightly so, since the repercussions caused by the existence of these barriers touch the social, psychological, cultural, academic, economic and technological outreaches of our lives. They separate us from our neighbours, and although technology has all but conquered the problem of space, countries that lie within 15 minutes of each other by plane remain strangers because they have not learned to communicate linguistically. The removal of these barriers can open the doors to a gamut of experiences, not only at a personal level but at the national and international as well, since, after all, language is still the principal medium of interaction and communication.

We are all familiar with the difficulties caused by language barriers among the larger nations of the world. We see this in the functioning or mal-functioning of large international organizations like the E.E.C., the U.N., the O.A.S., etc., when they meet for summit talks. Conferences of great importance to participating countries and involving decisions which could jeopardize the economy of a nation have to be manned with interpreters who may not, depending on their skill and level of alertness on that particular day, interpret correctly with the necessary nuances that accompany meaning.

We are also familiar with the difficulties caused by language barriers in large countries with multi-dialects like India and Africa and the attempts made from time to time to break down these barriers. Those of us here at this conference, at least, should be familiar with the difficulties caused by language barriers in the Caribbean region.

What precisely are the barriers which confront us here in the region? It might help if we started by defining what we actually mean by the Caribbean region. The Caribbean region includes all those countries and little islands that have their shores washed by the Caribbean Sea. They
include Spanish-speaking countries like the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, parts of Colombia and Venezuela, etc.; French-speaking countries: Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique; English-speaking countries to include the group of West Indian islands, the Windward and Leeward Islands, Dutch-speaking countries like Suriname, Curaçao and Aruba. Within each of these countries we find a large range of ethnic groups and behind this colourful and exotic array of people we find an equally colourful and exotic array of dialects and idiomatic expressions be it the patois as it is called in Jamaica and Haiti, and Papiamento and Sranan of Suriname and Curaçao, Creole as it is called in other countries or pidgin-English as it is called in still others.

The geographical barriers that exist between these countries and regions of the Caribbean cannot be so easily removed, but what are the possibilities of removing the language barriers? This is the theme that I will try to develop in this paper.

At the very outset it should be clearly understood that any attempt to remove the language barriers within the Caribbean territories is not to be linked in any way with an attempt either to supplant one language by another or to erode existing cultural patterns. The removal of language barriers is not to be seen as a de-culturalization process, it is not a destructive process. Quite on the contrary, it should be a wholly healthy and constructive one, one that builds unity within a society and among nations.

Each individual Caribbean territory represents a complex linguistic entity. In Jamaica, for example, the form of speech used by the majority of our people is Jamaican Creole English or 'patois' as it is more generally called. Dr. Frederic Cassidy in his paper "Teaching Standard English to Speakers of Creole" says: "Jamaican Creole English . . . . is definitely a language — not an auxiliary or pidgin speech, but the chief or only speech of a million and a half people. It has a structure which differs to a considerable degree from that of any kind of Standard English, British, Jamaican or American, in all its parts: in phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon." You will notice that Dr. Cassidy distinguishes a Jamaican Standard from other "Standards" of America and England.

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1/ Cassidy, Dr. F. - "Teaching Standard English to Speakers of Creole".
This phenomenon of which Dr. Cassidy speaks, is not unique to Jamaica. Most Caribbean countries have similar situations where a vernacular co-exist with what is considered a local Standard and a "Mother tongue" Standard, be it French, English or Dutch. The situation is even more complex in countries like Curacao and Suriname where the number of co-existing patterns of speech are multiple. This is one kind of language barrier and the importance of this is that these dialects themselves create barriers within the society, not only of communication but of identity. We must address ourselves to the removal of these internal barriers which seek to divide a society before we are to successfully tackle the problem of removing the language barriers that separate us as nations.

II. REMOVAL OF BARRIERS

In the preceding section, it has been stated that removal of language barriers, does not suggest removal of existing idiomatic patterns or the erosion of culture. This leaves us then with an alternative of the establishment of a language that all Caribbean nations would speak. This of course is nonsense. Something of the sort was attempted with Esperanto and this failed. Our solution will have to be less ambitious. The obvious solution is in language teaching and language learning.

Most of us here today have been victims of an educational system where we spent several agonizing hours at school and even at university level going through the rigors of learning the grammar of a foreign language. There was no secret that the goals and objectives of these 45-minute grammatical exercises were never intended to teach us to speak these languages be it French or Spanish or whatever. Rather, we were expected to become sufficiently familiar with the syntax and morphology of the second language to enable us to understand simple texts and short translations. As we ascended the academic ladder the texts would become more difficult and the translations somewhat longer and our familiarity with the language as it was spoken more remote.
You will agree with me that this system of language teaching has done very little towards the removal of language barriers in the region. It did little to teach us anything about our neighbours, their way of life, their habits, culture, what made them tick. In learning French, for instance, we were made to think of France, we were taught the Marseillaise and to recognize the tricolor. We were rarely reminded that our neighbours in Haiti and Martinique and Guadeloupe spoke French. The literature we studied was French literature from France, the songs, the poems.

Happily, this has changed over the years and the present educational system encourages greater communication with our Caribbean neighbours accompanied by a fuller awareness and appreciation of the culture behind the languages they speak and the people who speak these languages.

This can be achieved in several forms:

a. Methodology
b. Scope
   (i) The School
   (ii) The Community
   (iii) Socio-Economic and Technological Exchange
c. Culture
d. The Bilingual Society

a. Methodology

The method used for teaching a second language has often been said to determine the success or failure in language learning, and it is the method used that enables Language Centres to be able, in just a few short months to give their clients a good command of another language. Obviously, methods which confine themselves only to the study of linguistics will differ from those geared to foster closer relationships between peoples and to associate language with reality.

In recent years the theorists have developed and experimented with several methods and most language institutions are using one form or the other or a mixture of several forms depending on the results they seek and the results
they get. The Direct Method, the Silent Method, the Reading Method, the Language-Control Method, the Cognate Method, the Dual-Language Method are but a few.

Perhaps the most widely known and commonly attempted is the Direct Method. For this reason it has also caused the most controversy. The main characteristics of the Direct Method are: the use of everyday vocabulary and structure, grammar taught by situation, oral teaching of grammar and vocabulary, extensive listening and imitation until form becomes automatic, most of the work done in class, the few first weeks devoted to pronunciation. This seems a good enough method for quick grasping of the essentials of a language to make it function for the learner. But any method is only as good as its use and presentation. Who uses the method and how it is used must be important considerations if it is to achieve any degree of success. This means first of all that the goals and objectives of the language lessons must be clearly defined, the material carefully selected and graded, each lesson properly planned and presented and the result of the lesson evaluated. In other words, planning the lesson is very important.

It might be appropriate here to add a word about teaching aids. Today, many schools and language institutes have adopted an oral approach to language teaching. Writing and reading have taken second place to comprehension and speaking. In order to give life to these oral classes, and to develop greater skills in intonation and pronunciation, many teaching aids have come into play - the language laboratory - the language kit - the electronic classroom, the closed-circuit T.V., films, slides, tapes, records, reading material (newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, etc.) - the degree of usefulness of any one of these, depends I know, on how well it is employed, but there is no doubt that the introduction of these language "gimmicks" have made the learning of a second language far more interesting and dynamic, gearing the learner to use the target language to communicate and to want to use his newly acquired skill. After all, this is what language is all about and the person today who has a Ph.D. in a foreign language and cannot hold a conversation in this language has, to my mind, lost the essential of what language is all about, since the person must remain a stranger to his Spanish or French-speaking neighbour since he cannot communicate with him.
b. Scope

(i) The School: The first contact that most people have with a second language is usually at school. Traditionally, the teaching of a foreign language at school merely represented another subject to choose from, and very often the choice of which language to introduce in the school had little to do with the usefulness of that language to the community. So, for example, the first language to be introduced in the Jamaican school was not Spanish, as one would expect, but French, because our colonial masters, the English, had more teachers with French at their disposal than they had Spanish teachers, since the link between England and France was a closer one than that between England and Spain. Today, this has changed. Language teaching in schools has over the years been given more life and greater scope. In some schools the instruction is even given in the second language and the emphasis on the examination syllabus is given less prominence. It still has to be respected, but is it no longer the be all and end all of language teaching and today it is not unusual to find that the child who shows himself or herself incapable of sitting the exam is no longer asked to be a "drop cut", rather he or she is still allowed to attend special conversation classes where he continues to be encouraged to use the language.

(ii) The Community: The Community is by far the most important medium for the learning and maintenance of a language. When I was at school, the second language, like any other subject, was to be dropped after school if it did not itself form a part of one's career.

The French or Spanish book was put aside to gather dust and never a word of French or Spanish was to be spoken after that. Today, this is no longer so, the scope for language learning extends itself throughout the community level. In Jamaica, the Language Training Centre, which is a division of the Ministry of the Public Service, is doing its bit to breakdown the language barriers by offering courses in French, Spanish, German and Portuguese to Jamaicans from both the public and private sectors and English to non-English-speaking expatriates. In its three years of operations, the Centre has trained a total of 439 clients. At the moment there are 187 clients studying at the Centre and this includes some 30 young Jamaicans following full-time immersion
courses to prepare them for taking up scholarship awards in Cuba in September of this year. Similar language centres, I know, are being contemplated in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and Grenada. In Santo Domingo there is the Ives school for teaching English, Venezuela has several branches of its Instituto de Bolivar y Bello throughout the region and so on and so forth.

Radio, Television, the Newspapers, and the cinema could play a dynamic role in the teaching of a second language and so in addition to language institutes, language is being taught in many countries by means of these powerful media of mass communication. In Jamaica, the Daily Gleaner has a full length Spanish page which carries translations of the daily news, both radio stations and the television conduct French and Spanish lessons for home listeners and viewers and Radio Jamaica carries a five-minute news broadcast each day in Spanish.

Radio and television provide the oral and visual stimuli while newspapers, although they do not invoke listening or speaking, help the learner to maintain contact with the second language. Besides, reading material is often the most available form of contact with the language.

(iii) Socio-economic and Technological Exchange: In areas of contact such as the Caribbean region, administrative, cultural, political and socio-economic pressures must, of necessity, influence the learning of a second language. Many countries in the Caribbean region have signed agreements of cultural exchange and economic and technical co-operation. These programmes of cultural, scientific and technological exchanges have served to widen relationships among the countries of the region. The fact that these countries do not all share a common language, does, however, create a barrier and this lack affects greater interaction and understanding among the nations. It also impedes the timely exchange of scientific and technological data thus effectively slowing down the process of mutual exchange, problem solving and decision-making. In this context, it is necessary that steps be taken on the national and international levels to remove the existing language barriers and that greater emphasis be placed on the teaching of language skills at a community and governmental level so that the countries involved may participate more fully and with greater meaning in regional development.
If governments are to successfully share their technological skill and expertise then they must work towards that goal of uniformity in the compilation of data which can best be ensured by a breaking down of those linguistic barriers which so often confuse and misinterpret.

III. CULTURE

"Our inability to describe our cultural ways parallels our inability to describe our language - The individual acts of behaviour through which a culture manifests itself are never exactly alike, each is unique and the very same act never occurs again." 2/ The same may be said of patterns of speech and to learn a new language must perforce include an awareness and understanding of the underlying culture. Lado in his book makes the point that units of patterned behaviour, like units of patterned speech have form, meaning and distribution. I do not intend here to go into an analyses of Lado's book. But like him, I believe that "meanings" and "forms" are culturally determined or modified and this to my mind was adequately justified when a young Colombian teaching at the Language Training Centre voiced his unhappiness at a staff meeting when he said that he found it difficult to effectively communicate with his group of students because he got the impression that his clients (as we call our students) were anxious only to get at his language while rejecting his culture and he found it difficult to separate the two. Edward Sapir, many years ago, wrote "Language is becoming increasingly valuable as a guide to the scientific study of a given culture ... It is an illusion to think that we can understand the significant outlines of a culture through observations and without the guide of the linguistic symbolism which makes these outlines significant and intelligible to society ... language is a guide to 'social reality'". 3/

2/ Lado, Robert. - "Linguistics Across Culture".

3/ Sapir, Edward - "Language".
IV. THE BILINGUAL SOCIETY

In view of the above it is therefore not surprising that more and more countries within the Caribbean region are thinking in terms of the bilingual society. In each of these countries we can find the odd person who is truly bilingual, i.e. the person who has gained his second language through frequent travel and dual residency. Children brought up in homes where parents have different speech patterns are now encouraged to develop both speech patterns simultaneously and are natural bilinguals. But it is still questionable just what degree of bilingualism is actually possible within the framework of the educational system within the region.

There are, of course, different types of bilingualism described by some researchers as "co-ordinate bilingualism" and "compound bilingualism", "the dual residence bilingual", and the "single residence bilingual". But this is to get very sophisticated. I don't think we are too much concerned with the technicalities, interesting as they are. Suffice it to say that both types describe persons who can discuss everyday happenings with people who speak exclusively in one language or the other. We know, for instance, that true bilingualism must include not only language and gesture and other behaviour patterns peculiar to the second language but should reveal a perfect sensitivity to the culture as well. True bilingualism, however, because of the lack of human and financial resources, remain a long-term goal. For the present what we may aim at is a certain degree of facility in more than one language.

Essential to any advances toward creating a bilingual society is of course the languages to be selected. Within the Caribbean region there are societies which are already truly bilingual, Curaçao, Suriname, Haiti, Jamaica. These are bilingual societies where one language is used in certain situations and another on other more formal occasions. A home language and a business language. At the international level, however, citizens can only communicate in one language, i.e. the official language.
What is the foreign language to be chosen? That will obviously depend on the needs of the individual countries. But in the Caribbean region, English and or Spanish must be considered in light of the mere size of the English and Spanish-speaking communities.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

How then should we go about breaking down the language barriers which so much jeopardize the spirit of unity within the region?

1. Restructure the language programmes:
   Make the class meaningful and interesting. De-emphasize the structural approach to grammar omitting terminologies where possible and concentrate rather on the use of patterns and idiomatic expressions in real life situations presented in dialogue form. This gives the learner the feel of using the target language from the very outset.

2. Motivate the learner:
   Give the learner a reason for wanting to learn the target language. Most adults who register for language courses are usually sufficiently self-motivated. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in the schools. But with a little imagination the teacher can help to motivate the student. Give the student a living or direct experience of the target language by letting him participate in the learning process. Let him talk, and listen to him even if his effort at the beginning is limp. Be patient. NEVER let him feel that he is not reaching you. NEVER interrupt him to make corrections, and when he falters, help him along with a kind word.

3. Adapt Methods to Goals:
   The method adopted must reflect the goal and objectives. This will include the time spent in learning the language as well as the aids that are used and the vocabulary that is stressed. Administrators, diplomats and government people for instance may be required to use the second language at a more sophisticated level than the person who is learning the language merely for communicative cultural reasons.

4. Choose the Instructor with Care:
   As far as is possible, educated native speakers of the target language should be used. This is not, however, to suggest that every educated native speaker is going to be the best choice from a pedagogical point of view, but the advantage
here is that he is able to lend authenticity to the important combination of culture and language. In any case, the instructor must be well chosen. After all, any method is only as good as the people who use it. I should also like to suggest greater co-operation among teachers in the region with regard to methodology and evaluation of the methodologies used.

5. **Support the Target Language:**
Where possible the language session should be supported with films, records, tapes and visiting tours to a country where the language is spoken. Exchange programmes, language workshops are also very valuable. Make the language come alive before the student's eyes. Let him associate it with people and actions.

6. Finally, I should like to strongly endorse proposal No. 1 taken at the March meeting last year, in the Dominican Republic, which was that of establishing a Centre for the teaching of English, French and Spanish, and for conducting cultural research within the Caribbean countries. This is a must, since no one will deny that the presence of technical and scientific advance is bound to require new social and communicative needs.