Meeting on Removal of Language Barriers
Belize City, Belize
4-7 April 1978

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR

SPECIAL CO-OPERATION PROJECTS

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UNITED NATIONS

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA Office for the Caribbean

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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."[1/] You will notice that Dr. Cassidy distinguishes a Jamaican Standard from other "Standards" of America and England.

[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 Curaçao 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 grammatic 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. <u>Methodology</u>

      b. <u>Scope</u>

            (i) The School
            (ii) The Community
            (iii) Socio-Economic and Technological Exchange

      c. <u>Culture</u>

      d. <u>The Bilingual Society</u>

a. <u>Methodology</u>

      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 out",
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 80 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.