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LANGUAGE AND DIPLOMACY  
Edited by Jovan Kurbalija and Hannah Slavik

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While her speech provided plenty of evidence to support the collaborative problem-solving problematic suggested by Cohen and others, however, what receives very little acknowledgment in it is the idea that others have their own conceptions about the nature of the problems needing solutions and, indeed, that others have interests. Insofar as these are recognised, Albright identifies them as "our goals" which need explaining and "each other's needs" which require understanding if we are all to work together successfully.

The significance of these remarks is given a context in other speeches she made during her final round of the Washington and national circuits. In her farewell address at the State Department, for example, she concluded by saying:

Our country, like any, is composed of humans and therefore flawed. We are not always right in our actions and our judgements, but I know from the experience of my own life the importance and rightness of America's ideals.<sup>12</sup>

Two days before, in a speech to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations in which she explicitly rejected seeing US foreign policy in terms of a debate between "Wilsonian idealists and geo-political realists", she provided her own formula for the seamless relationship between ideals and self-interest in US foreign policy under the Clinton administration. The administration had, she claimed, been "...determined to do the right thing in a pragmatic way".<sup>13</sup>

One has to be careful in the way one selects and uses this kind of text. The professionals among us, and those who study what they say, will be quick to recognise the formulaic quality of the selections above and sense the way in which they are generated by the demands of the occasion. In the Chicago speech, for example, Albright began by saying that for her final trip as Secretary of State:

...it is no accident that I didn't choose to go to the capital of a foreign country, but rather to the capital of America's heartland.

She also provided a different definition of diplomacy or, at least, American diplomacy. "The job of our diplomats..." she maintained "...is to protect and advance the interests of our citizens."<sup>14</sup> In the immediate context she was flattering her audience and boosting the State Department with a hard nose sell to those sceptics who believe that its job is to represent the interests of foreigners in Washington and at unnecessary expense.

And yet, when coupled with my own experience of working with Americans, there is something more implied by what Albright chooses, or has chosen for her, to say on such occasions and the way in which it is expressed. First, I would maintain, there is a confident grasp on what life is all about, and by this I do not just mean a strong sense of American identity. It is a grasp of what life, in general, for everybody is, or ought to be, about. I wish I could say that this was just a presentational requirement for elite membership and advancement, but it is not. It seems to be manifested at all levels of society, if not uniformly among all races and ethnic groups. Nor is this a phenomenon associated with one end of the political spectrum. Members of the right and left or, more accurately, conservatives and liberals, all tend to manifest this confidence about their own conception of America as an embodiment of the way in which real people everywhere, if only free of the burden of lazy state bureaucrats or cranky neo-Marxian intellectuals would really like to live.

Secondly, this confident grasp of life in general has a place for those who simply do not conform to its requirements. Paradoxically, for a society which is founded upon an 18th century philosophy preserved in aspic, as it were, which took interests very seriously, it has little tolerance not so much for those who are different, but for those who will not "play ball". Demonisation is a term which has perhaps been over-used, but this is effectively what can happen to those who are uncooperative. They must be wicked or, at least, led by the wicked.

Some of the targets of this process of demonisation in recent years have certainly deserved it, but I think what makes this indulgence so difficult for others to accept is its selective character. "Their" sons-of-bitches or, these days, free standing sons-of-bitches get the full treatment whereas "our" sons-of-bitches barely figure as such on the radar screens. And of course, the whole concept of demonisation, fairly or selectively employed, is a nightmare for effective diplomacy which is

premised in great part on the need to talk with those for whom we do not feel responsible, may not trust, or do not like, but with whom we must, nevertheless, have relations.

How then do we talk to such people? I will conclude with some brief talking points. Sometimes, there can be no talking to them at all. Sometimes they are rich enough and strong enough to have their way. Nearly always, they are rich enough and strong enough to go home if they do not like what is happening, with losses to everybody but asymmetrically distributed. However, more often than not, and for bad reasons as well as good ones (consider Clinton's recent efforts on the Middle East peace process, like a cardiologist applying the paddles when every one else in the room, including the patient, is telling him he's dead for now) they want to talk.

On the big question of the relationship between language and the "out there" which is variously posited not to exist, to be constructed by language, or accessed by it directly, I would suggest showing respect for American claims to a privileged access. Respect here can mean several things. As a Briton who has lived in the US for fifteen years and before that was congenitally disposed against even visiting the place, let alone living there, I am happy to concede that, as civilizational models go, they, the Americans, have got a lot of things right and, more importantly, they have got a lot of things right in the judgement of many less privileged than ourselves around the world. Respect can also mean simply taking them seriously in their claims. Americans are frequently presented as gauche, naive, incapable of irony (watch the Simpsons) or ambiguity and understatement (watch Frazier), that they somehow don't get what life is really all about for those who are fully human. These are, in my judgement, mistakes. Taking Americans seriously, however, can also mean simply acknowledging their power and wealth (those of you who saw Jurassic Park may remember the expert's mini lesson to the bored and unimpressed child about how raptors hunt and kill, which culminates in his dragging the claw across the boy's belly and enjoining him to "...show a little respect").

On the operational question of how diplomats should deal with the problem of language and culture once they become aware of it, the advice is the same as that given by the literature to Americans about how to deal with foreigners. Make adjustments to avoid unnecessary offence (Americans have a highly peculiar habit of resenting what they see as the impor-

tion of irrelevant data or arguments into a negotiation; a tale of five hundred years of oppression may win you a fifth down, they may even spot you three points, but a touch down remains a touch down, especially after they have scored it) and make such adjustments where mutual or unilateral gains are possible as a result (I was recently engaged in a negotiation with a British university where everybody was incredibly uncomfortable talking about money, including their money man, to the point that the negotiation possibly failed prematurely). Stepping out of one's own culture to deal with foreigners is no dishonour, indeed I am sure it is ranked as one of the attributes of a successful diplomat.

Finally regarding the political dimension to language, culture and the practice of diplomacy, it is reasonably easy to imagine a number of techniques for exploiting the particularities of culture of which we are all, to a point prisoners. On this matter, however, I will take my cue from the professionals among us, acknowledge that diplomacy is, indeed, a political business, smile, and fall silent.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 My title echoes Monteaugle Stearne's *Talking With Strangers: Improving American Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad* (Princeton, 1999).
- 2 Madeleine Albright, *Remarks at Chief of Diplomatic Missions Ball*, January 13, 2001, State Department website, <http://www.state.gov/index.cfm>.
- 3 Raymond Cohen, "Negotiating Across Languages," paper prepared for the British International Studies Annual Conference, Bradford, December, 2000, 1.
- 4 Raymond Cohen, "International Negotiations: A Semantic Analysis," *Columbia Online*, <http://www.cc.columbia.edu/sec/dlc/ciao/isa/cor01/February 1999>.
- 5 To distinguish between big, or capital, "D" Diplomats and small "d" diplomats appears to be one way of finessing another problem, whether

the term may be used for the representatives of anything other than sovereign states and the international organisations created by them.

6 "How the United States Negotiates," conference organised by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 24-26 July 2000, reported in *Peace Watch*, VI, 6, October 2000.

7 *Ibid.*, 2-3.

8 Note, however, that none of the characteristics observed are a manifestation of different interests, at least not directly. Wealth and power may be isolated from culture up to a point, but interests take their shape from, and may even be rooted in culture.

9 Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World*, revised ed. (Washington DC: USIP Press, 1997), 25-43.

10 Satow's phrase about the essentially tragic circumstances in which even the very best diplomats, both in moral and practical terms, may find themselves.

11 Albright, *Remarks*.

12 Farewell Address to the State Department, January 19, 2001.

13 Address to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, January 17, 2001.

14 *Ibid.*

## LANGUAGE, SIGNALING AND DIPLOMACY

Kishan S. Rana

The Bhagwad Gita, one of the sacred texts of the Hindus, consists entirely of the battlefield dialogue between Arjun, the noble warrior, and Krishna who has taken on the role of his chariot driver. An epic battle is about to commence and Arjun is torn by doubt, whether he should engage in the fight. He wonders if it is not better to let the adversaries, who are his half-brothers, take over the kingdom. Krishna then guides him in an extended discourse on righteous action, the choice of which must come from within each individual, in the exercise of the full faculties of the individual's own "mind" or intellect. Krishna tells him that this method will lead the individual to the correct choice of action, which he describes as "action without attachment". During the long dialogue, Krishna narrates to Arjun the qualities of an "ideal person" and in one notable verse,<sup>1</sup> he describes the attributes of good speech.

In two terse lines, heavily laden with meaning as typical with the Bhagwad Gita, Krishna offers timeless advice on how one should speak, advice that also seems well-suited to diplomacy. Good speech should be marked by the following qualities, in ordered priority: it should not disturb the mind of the listener; it should be precise, with correct use of language; it should be truthful; if possible, it should be pleasing to the listener; and again if possible, it should be of utility to the listener.

Truthfulness is not presented as the highest virtue, over-riding other qualities. Rather, premier place goes to the requirement of not causing distress to the listener. Precision and good linguistic craftsmanship are rated as another high quality. Then comes truth. Are these not features that qualify as a good diplomatic dialogue method?

The ancient Indian sage Manu transcribed the above advice in a few pithy words that a good diplomat might easily accept to his advantage. Manu declared: "Speak the pleasant, but not the untruth; speak the truth, but not the unpleasant."

I propose to look at the subject of language, and particularly signaling, from the perspective of the ordinary pursuit of diplomacy, including the kind of situations commonly faced by diplomats in real life conditions. Compared with the high drama of major international events that may