
Christian Mission Conferences Enabling Communication across Linguistic and Economic Divides; Focusing on Africa

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Introduction¹

Walking through a parking lot at a private Christian university in the United States during a mission conference, I was with an African man in his 50s, the recognised leader (bishop) of a church with hundreds of branches in an African country. We watched as teenage students climbed into and then drove off in their privately owned four-wheel drive trucks. “Teenage girls in America have smart cars to go to school in; I am a bishop in Africa and do not even have a vehicle for my work,” remarked my colleague. Something seemed to be wrong.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28, NIV). All are one before the Lord. Yes. But not all are equally blessed in this world. Material blessings are rather unevenly distributed. How can God’s salvation be universal, yet blessing be distributed so unevenly? When people are as differently blessed as many Americans versus Africans are, something has got to give.²

I want in this article to discuss the functioning of certain contexts of temporary equality, particularly events arranged by scholars, such as conferences. International conferences are designed to realise, for a period, the biblical ideal of inter-human equality. Once someone has registered and paid their fees (or had their fees paid for them) for an international conference, they have joined a temporarily equal community. My concern is primarily with Christian conferences. My focus in this article is on language, and ways in which poor linguistic planning is contributing to confusion at mission conferences, and thus to ongoing spiritual and material poverty in Africa.

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2. “Africa” as referred to in this article should be assumed to refer to sub-Saharan Africa.

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Something has got to give

In this consideration of the ongoing impact of colonialism in today’s world, my focus is on Africa, and especially on language issues. One advantage—and at the same time one concern—with international conferences today, is that many conferences can, using a global language such as English, function with minimal translation. Brutt-Griffler looks at the origins of the globalization or internationalization of English. Many have seen the spread of English as a “culturally imperialistic project.”³ Brutt-Griffler questions whether this was actually the case. Did the British insist on the use of English in their colonies as a means of keeping colonial states under their thumb? The reality, Brutt-Griffler finds, is much more complex. Colonial “British language policy is perhaps best characterised as reactive in its quest to limit access to English,”⁴ she tells us. The policy was to limit access to English, because “Asians and Africans ... deliberately ... transformed English from a means of exploitation into a means of resistance through appropriating the language ... language thereby played a role in the anti-colonial struggle that British colonial officers had never envisioned.”⁵ Brutt-Griffler points out that the drive to learn English came from the people of the colonies. There was

3. Janina Brutt-Griffler, *World English: a study of its development* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2002), 7.

4. *Ibid.*, x.

5. *Ibid.*, 15.

no forced imposition of the language, but a desperate scramble for it. Perhaps the British were misguided in their efforts to resist the appropriation of English around the world. It is always easy to throw doubt on the motives and intelligence or wisdom of the acts of previous generations. Colonials are particularly easy targets, it seems. On the other hand, could it be that in some respects they were right to try to resist this, and that the world is still suffering the consequences of the colonialists' failure to prevent the spread of their language?

There is no substitute for learning someone's language in order to become informed about them. Knowledge of someone else's language opens their vista on the world to one's view. It enables over-hearing. It enables engagement with a people and their institutions in depth, reading their literature—should they have one—penetration of and exposure of their secrets. No doubt some colonialists did acquire this kind of mastery of subjected people's languages. But often it was clearly subjected people who were much more effective in their research on the colonialists than the other way around. The spread of English means that the wisdom of the native-English world is flagrantly spread around the globe, while the knowledge of numerous ex-colonial subjects is increasingly difficult to research. This has given the latter an upper-hand in aspects of knowledge and understanding. Who then was to exploit whom?

Phillipson commented on the colonial practice in part at least in response to the "threats" that arose from a knowledge of English on the part of colonial subjects, that "local language education had the ... purpose ... to cut off the disadvantaged social classes from virtually all enlightenment."⁶ That is probably a common view. I would like to qualify it in two ways:

- Colonialists began early on to realize the problem we, today, refer to as "dependency." They perceived that colonial subjects learning English could boost their communities, but by means that seemed to be draining British economy and society. That is, taking someone else's language in this way was not a means to enable societies that were colonial subjects to stand on their own two feet, but rather to make them ever more dependent. This is because many colonial subjects learned English without its context. Learning English from a book in a far-flung context is very different from learning it in the midst of the push-and-shove of native English life. This difference is too little realized even today. It leaves people with an English that can be good at drawing on the mother body (UK) but much less good at enabling personal initiative and doing something for oneself. Sharifian explains this in detail: this is because languages carry conceptualizations that are essential to their correct interpretation.⁷

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- As articulated in Harries,⁸ the dominant philosophy of the nineteenth century is now seen as having been fundamentally flawed. For example, the latter part of that century especially saw a questioning of the necessary centrality of what is today sometimes known as *religion* in human society. Colonial interests promoted a mechanical development of human society that ignored the degree to which "development" in Europe had only been made possible by its long and deep exposure to Christianity. Although Christian missions have been very active alongside colonialists, their message was not fully integrated into the colonial project. Colonialists taking the flag without the cross⁹ gave people a one-legged platform for development. When this one-legged platform is communicated by much of the development fraternity today, African (and presumably Indian) people are left with theoretical knowledge without the belief-system that needs to underscore it.

Where has the gap gone?

The colonialists' endeavour to prevent the spread of their mother-tongue failed. Recently, it is being spread by technological means that were unheard of and probably beyond the wildest dreams of early colonial officers. I focus on Africa, where the ongoing impact of colonialism is perhaps the most extreme. Ex-colonial languages now have extremely widespread use in almost all formal sections of life in *many* African states. That is the status quo. How does this *fact* impact how people relate inter-culturally in conferences, and similar contexts? Were the colonialists misguided, whose efforts at preventing the spread of English were entirely selfish, naïve, and

6. Ibid., 120.

7. Farzad Sharifian, *Cultural Linguistics* (Amsterdam, Pa.: John Benjamins, 2017).

8. Jim Harries, *Communication in Mission and Development: relating to the church in Africa* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 23.

9. Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag* (England: Appollos, 1990)

misguided? Or has the fact that they failed in their objective left us with a situation in which *something has to give*? How will this thing that has to “give” impact on the inter-cultural communication that is going on today?

In other words, if the colonial era was as problematic as we now often consider it to have been, what aspect of that problem continues to be visible to scholarship today? More specifically, by what means are mission conferences attempting to compensate for the damage done by colonialism? If this is not happening at all, why not, and what is the ongoing impact of colonialism on mission conferences?

Another way to perceive the above concerns is to ask: Where has the gap gone? I will look at the gap between the West and Africa in terms of power in the next section of this article. For now, I want to consider it in terms of culture.¹⁰ There are basic cultural differences between Westerners and Africans. That is to say, there is a cultural gap. What happens to that gap when the Brit or American is speaking with a Ugandan or Kenyan using English at a conference? I suggest that there are two basic options. 1. The gap is either evident and visible, for example, in accents that are hard to follow or in a Ugandan trying to explain things in a way that is unfamiliar to a Westerner. 2. The gap is not evident, but still there. The more familiar African people are with Western languages, the easier it becomes for them to make the gap seem to disappear.

The “gap” that I refer to above means that understanding between African and Western people will always be partial. Now, of course, understanding between any two people is always partial. In the above case, however, it will be more partial than normal! The best example to illustrate this that comes to mind is a conversation between two men who are living in very different terrain but are not aware of that fact. Imagine the two men are linked over a mobile phone network, so they can communicate. They use one language, let us say the language of being in the mountains. One of them is indeed living on a wet mountainside, but the other lives on a dry plain. They cannot see each other’s contexts and have no way of knowing them apart from the conversation in which they are engaged. Because the language is of the wet mountainside, the man on the dry plain is obliged to articulate his context as if he is on the mountainside. Because the language is predetermined, he will be doing this whether he realizes it or not. Meanwhile, the man he is talking to, who is on the mountainside, is receiving information that he takes to be about a mountainside context. If he is perceptive, he may notice discrepancies with the mountainside context. If he does, then he has two choices; either he can assume that his colleague is a bit dim, but say nothing. Or he can question him to determine the source of the irregularities that he perceives.

A similar example could be of two farmers who are in phone contact. Let us imagine that one of the farmers rears sheep whereas the other rears cattle. Both use the same term to refer to their sheep

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and cattle; let’s say they refer to them as “livestock.” In conversation over the phone both men assume that the other is looking after the same kind of animal as they themselves are. Anyone even vaguely familiar with livestock-rearing practices can imagine the ambiguities that would arise in conversation. The sheep farmer will be amazed at the large quantity of hay eaten daily by just one of his colleague’s “livestock.” The cattle farmer will wonder how the sheep farmer wrestles his “livestock” to the ground and has them sit on their buttocks leaning up against him. In the going forward of this relationship there are two choices. Either the two men continue to be incredulous over what the other is doing but say nothing, or they can ask probing questions that might result in their recognizing that the animals they are looking after are different. They would then realize that advice given by (say) the sheep farmer often won’t pertain directly to the cattle farmer.

In both the above cases, the men might meet at a conference. Organizers of the conference may insist that only one language, e.g., the language of mountainside (example 1 above) or a supposedly neutral language of livestock (example 2 above) be used. By doing so, they will effectively create an irresolvable dissonance. Their failure to overtly recognize the very real differences between the extant contexts will nullify and confuse some intended outcomes of the conference. Apparent unity of the conference will be illusionary.

The more desirable alternative would be to acknowledge that two inherently different contexts are under consideration, and that two languages and streams of thought should be allowed and encouraged. It should be noted that one would need separate languages, and separate discussions. When I was at agricultural college, we did not ask that a class on cattle-rearing be *translated* for us into sheep language. That would have been ridiculous. Sheep farming not only had a separate terminology (ewes, lambs ... etc.) but it was also a separate subject with its own field of expertise. Simply to have had someone standing next to our lecturer translate “a cow needs 20 kg of hay per day” into “a sheep needs 2 kg of hay per day” would have been considered laughable.

International Christian conferences may address vastly different contexts, but they often do so using one language and with one very dominant presupposed context—the Western one. Non-Westerners are told to adapt what they learn to their own context (and language). They are at the same time expected to

10. I appreciate that in ultimate terms such a distinction is somewhat artificial. I consider it useful for the organization of this essay.

participate in the conferences. Majority-world Christians can be led into confused avenues of understanding, usually motivated by their (very understandable) need for money.¹¹ The same applies not only to conferences, but also to educational institutions, inter-governmental engagement, presumably business conferences and so on.

Power concessions to English

Alexander realised that African countries' choice of European languages for self-governance was often no choice at all. It was a *fait accompli* arising from the colonial legacy. In Africa "the languages of Europe ... became the languages of power" (1999:5). European languages were taken as "superior to the indigenous vernaculars" (1999:5-6). One result of "colonial oppression" was that "it seemed as though every newly independent African state was doomed to take the same language policy detour by accepting in practice the primacy of the ex-colonial language ..." (1999:5-6).

This issue of language in Africa is no light or jovial matter. It is more like a deep and painful wound. It is not an old wound that is gradually healing. It is more like a wound caused by a jagged hook that remains imbedded in the ever-raw flesh of the African community. The penchant of the European becomes the deep pain of Africans who find themselves disenfranchised into a kind of perpetual slavery to the whim of others. The painful grate of European languages prodding the wound of Africans gets stronger and stronger with every advance in the globalization of communication. The absence of indigenously driven economic advance in Africa can, according to Alexander, be attributed to this diabolical language situation (1999:9).¹²

This situation in which African people's soul is being held in an inadvertent vice-grip in European people's hands is not going to be easy to resolve. Alexander approaches it from a language-policy angle by strongly advocating for multilingualism in South Africa (1999:13-14) and by implication the rest of Africa. This is an issue that is almost too cutting and pressing for African people to address themselves. Contemporary generations find themselves raised in a disastrous *sackgasse* not of their own making. Talking about it can be wiggling the hot iron in the open wound mentioned above. All that many African people can really do is to hope against hope that their situation will somehow resolve itself.

The forced silence of the African mentioned above means that those engaging in mission conferences (and others) really need to act without first being advised to do so by African people,

11. I refer to their need for money as being "very understandable," because Western mission conferences tend to advocate ways of doing things that are very dependent upon receiving outside funds.

12. My reader may well perceive a parallel between the situation here being described for sub-Saharan Africa and that pertaining to the use of Ebonics by Black-Americans. Perhaps it is no coincidence that there are questions of whether Ebonics shouldn't be considered a separate language from English, even for those Blacks who live deeply within the North American milieu, (i.e., for over 50 years with equal rights with native American people with whom they share schools, workplaces, in communities and so on).

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sometimes even in the face of opposition from African people, who see their short-term interests painfully undermined by any threat to European-language hegemony. Mission dollars pouring into the African continent need a positive slant in favour of African languages, if they are not just to add to current levels of oppression. Money, in many ways unfortunately, is a fool—it is blind, deaf, and dumb. More important than funding for African languages are *Western missionaries who will take African languages very seriously*. Learning African languages is not a distraction from biblical directives, but a prerequisite to the possibility of a successful implementation of biblical imperatives. (It is also a prerequisite for successful promotion of sustainable indigenous development.) One can hardly talk to people about matters of heart and soul using gibberish. Nor can one use a language that oppresses and confuses them.

Sometimes it is too easy, as scholars, to dance around issues instead of grasping the nettle. Sometimes there has to be a place for also stating categorically what is evidently true: the use of European languages as primary language of instruction, language of governance and language of official business in Africa is a crazy project that should never have begun. Every year as the world globalizes and international communication increases, it gets the more cruel, barbarous, and akin to slavery. Political forces pushing the barbarism are indeed enormous. As Christians, we do not need to oppose such political forces head-on. Jesus never did that. Neither did Paul or the other apostles on record. What we *can* do is to promote Jesus and promote the kingdom of God, which requires communicating with people at heart level, which requires African languages.

Various excuses are sometimes thrown up when one promotes African languages:

- There are too many languages in Africa. The answer to this apparent problem for Christian mission is simple; choose one language and work with it.
- Using an African language will limit my ministry. Does everybody's ministry have to be global? Is it below the dignity of a

missionary to take on the project of discipling 100,000 people for God, if there are say only 100,000 speakers of a language?

- European languages have become African languages, some say. Yes to an extent, but where are European languages being controlled from?

It is extremely difficult today to find even one Western missionary who has a close understanding of even one African language.¹³ Given the thousands of people and millions of mission dollars regularly being invested into the continent from the West, and the millions of African souls in need of the gospel, that is surely no less than a travesty! The above-mentioned “excuses” are excuses for what is inexcusable. Conferences should be called and held in African languages. If European people cannot contribute to the vernacular churches in Africa, then the least they should do is to stop trying to use their money combined with European languages to control them.

Conclusion: mission strategy in the light of linguistic reality

Having translation at global conferences, were such to happen, would be just beginning to poke at the magnitude of the challenge we are here looking at. This problem is deeply insidious. Between the West and Africa, as a result of the use of European languages, there is a thick curtain of misconceptions. Africans are not to blame for these misconceptions; they arose as if by default. First the European missionary goes to Africa and says “if someone asks you this question then this is how you should answer it.” (Christian mission’s contribution to the globalized educational system in European languages.) Then the missionary researcher asks the said question of the African. Of course, she will get the expected answer! African people are invited to the international conference that functions in a European language. They are funded by people who have a vested interest in what Africans will say. So, they say what they are expected to say, such as that “we need lots of books written in English, theological education in English, technology from the West and language teachers to teach us better English ...” and so on. The Africans say what they are supposed to say. If they do not, then they do not get invited back to the next conference, and quite likely they lose their livelihood when donors set them adrift back into the sea of poverty.

Mission conferences used to be places where young people were inspired to set out to reach people of different tribes and nations with the Word of God. More recently, they have become places for receiving confused messages in English from people sponsored to say things that listeners’ ears want to hear (this seems to be reminiscent of 2 Tim 4:3). Often there is rejoicing over the way the church has spread around the world. Then there are appeals to say that Western help is still needed. To rejoice in what God is doing is good. To then consider the battle largely to be over

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is, I suggest, premature. Many battles for the kingdom remain to be fought. A relative neglect of global mission over recent years has, I suggest, arisen from the confusion between “development” and gospel connected to linguistic issues mentioned in this article. It has already put the missionary endeavour back. The work of the gospel needs to go forward. This requires people who are ready to cross cultural barriers, not those who assume cultural barriers have disappeared. “When they heard that din they all gathered and every person amongst them was amazed as they were speaking each person’s own language” (Acts 2:6 – translation from *Dholuo* in Kenya). It happened then. Can Western missionaries still speak in other people’s languages today?

13. I.e., a language that has a clear majority of African speakers or that is rooted and originates in sub-Saharan Africa.