
Language, Identity, and Power in International Assistance Missions

SAMANTHA LAKIN

*If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.*

– *Nelson Mandela*

INTRODUCTION

Increased global interconnection has spurred awareness of and a reckoning with human suffering previously out of sight, especially for Western nations. The 24-hour news cycle, televised journalism, and war reporters' increased ease of movement and access have brought previously distant images of the graphic realities of war and conflict into people's living rooms. One result is a palpable shift in social awareness. Many Americans recall their shocked families staring at their TV screens as the events of September 11, 2001 unfolded in real time. In the following decades, American society witnessed a sharp increase in public advocacy and protests, especially during the Trump administration. With heightened exposure of global issues, many Americans realized that seemingly distant conflicts have the potential to impact their personal lives, livelihoods, and futures. Public media documentation and online mobilization have further strengthened global citizen activism around international justice and human rights.

Dr. Samantha Lakin is a specialist on post-atrocity justice, comparative genocide, human security, and African affairs. Dr. Lakin's research about memory and justice in post-genocide Rwanda spanned seven years of fieldwork in Rwanda and the Great Lakes region of Africa. She was a Fulbright Scholar in Rwanda and Switzerland, and a Graduate Research Fellow at Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation. Dr. Lakin holds a MALD from The Fletcher School at Tufts University, and a Ph.D. from Clark University.

These changes yield new dynamics regarding the ways in which citizenries respond to international insecurity and violations of human rights.

Multiple and competing narratives—promoted in real time on social media—can either build communities or divide societies. The position and power of those who author, share, or post impacts the proliferation of available information, opinions, and stories about significant global issues including human trafficking, terrorism, climate change, displacement, refugee flows, and conflict over resources.

Certain popular media initiatives are breaking down barriers between peoples. Although flawed, popular media has created spaces where non-Western and non-English-speaking voices can make themselves heard in ways even more starkly present on mainstream news media. The continuing success of language learning programs such as NaTakallam shows that there is a popular interest in engaging with people from different cultures.

Nevertheless, popular news media still largely relies on experts from the Global North to comment on issues taking place in the Global South. Development aid, humanitarian assistance, capacity building initiatives, and military interventions organized and funded by governments and organizations based in the Global North often ignore experts from the Global South, thereby dooming their own initiatives. For example, many initiatives designed and funded by Western governmental development agencies define “expertise” according to Western notions of power. This power is replicated through education, institutional affiliations, and an access to national or international donors, among others.

While many West-approved experts are knowledgeable, skilled, and dedicated to solving global problems, international assistance relies disproportionately on privileged voices without recognizing expertise rooted in lived experience of the conflict or war itself. When local expertise is not included in analyzing and understanding underlying causes of conflict, or sufficiently recognized when designing solutions, development programs and interventions will continue to miss the mark regarding their intended impact. Based on the issues identified above, this article presents one theoretical solution (learning languages to build a sense of community) applied to the practical case study of United Nations peacekeepers in Rwanda (1993-4) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, 2003-2005).

Within the fields of international relations, political history, anthropology, and law, the rising prominence of critical perspectives challenges the status quo of frameworks built on colonial, exploitative, and patriarchal foundations. For example, principles of “do no harm” entered practice of development aid, humanitarian assistance, multilateral and bilateral

promotion of democracy and rule of law, and even military intervention. These principles reveal a new top-down commitment to addressing the impact of the global distribution of structural power on marginalized communities.

Similarly relevant is the “local turn” in international peacebuilding theory, as discussed by Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond in their 2013 article.¹ Richmond and Mac Ginty argue that contemporary peacebuilding projects are most effective when they are localized, condemning Western neo-colonial approaches to peacebuilding. They propose an alternative, arguing that local states should be empowered to diagnose and solve their problems. This “local turn” in peacebuilding emerged as a response to the failed interventions and intellectual assaults of liberal peace actors into and against illiberal states.² In particular, social anthropologists who rely on deep ethnographic research highlight ways of how understanding and relying on grassroots narratives and culturally valuable initiatives may lead to the creation of more effective intervention methodologies.³

In addition to macro-level, institutional examples, this article explores how individual action can interrogate unequal power dichotomies to create bridges between powerful and marginalized actors. Realistically, individuals are deeply intertwined within broader political, diplomatic, and military structures. At times, individual action represents and promotes the mission and values of the broader institution. At other times, individual agency is represented through a divergence from official orders.

Language, however, can create a sense of shared identity that has the potential to supersede existing divisions between those who hold power and those who lack it. Oft minimized in importance when compared to other factors that shape group identity, this article highlights examples of how shared language can provide an additional strategy toward addressing power imbalances. To begin addressing unequal dynamics between Global Northern and Global Southern expertise, this article explores the potential of shared language to engage marginalized voices in multicultural contexts.

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THEORY AND LITERATURE

Legal scholar Zachary Kaufman discusses three factors that inform state decisions about intervening in international war and conflict.⁴ Kaufman concludes that every state decision is based on a combination of idealism, politics, and pragmatics. As such, they do not always follow the same logic. Kaufman's argument on decision-making extends beyond the state to other government agencies, international NGOs, and militaries. They do not only rely on core or defining values, but also consider strategic interest and practical consequences, consulting information often collected from diverse settings.

Both normative and strategic fallacies arise when interventions seeking to respect what is perceived to be local adaptations of state, citizen, and governance, and in so doing systematically marginalize vulnerable communities by ignoring their perspectives. Normatively, maintaining status quo engagement reinforces power asymmetries between actors, and can result in intended or unintended exploitation of people who are already suffering.⁵ Strategically, ignoring the perspectives of vulnerable communities works against the best interest of engagement. Local citizens are experts in their own situations. Studies by Nordstrom and Robben, Rombouts, and Robins and Wilson, among others, show that "outsiders," as knowledgeable and embedded as they may be, cannot fully capture nuanced perspectives of the issues at hand in the same way as those who live through such experiences.⁶

Moreover, historical examples show that when political and power structures marginalize vulnerable groups, they are more prone to radicalization, militia recruitment, crime, corruption, and wielding violence in pursuit of public recognition. For instance, Marc Sommers, among others, concludes that young, disenfranchised, and poor men were particularly susceptible to propaganda and recruitment into the *Interahamwe* militia, a major perpetrator group of the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994.⁷ In July 1994, many members of the *Interahamwe* fled military advances of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), seeking refuge in the former Zaire (present-day DRC). In the dense forests of Eastern Congo, militia activity continued. The creation of new rogue groups produced further instability beyond Rwanda's borders.⁸

Similarly, in Sierra Leone, the rebel group Revolutionary United Front (RUF) terrorized civilians during the civil war from 1991-2002. The group consisted mostly of young adults, who were drawn to the RUF leaders as a way to express their frustration with political and governance systems that had marginalized them, excluding them from political and

economic development. Many felt that joining the RUF was the only way to be heard and validated. As such, feeling marginalized in the novel democracy, the group resorted to extreme coercion, including abducting children and harming citizens who opposed them.⁹

As conflicts arise, marginalized communities feel disproportionately disconnected from the broader society. If power and positionality are not considered, acknowledged, and integrated into decisions at state, societal, and communal levels, intervention can result in further alienation of the exact communities whose trust and engagement are needed for interventions to succeed.

Postcolonialism is not a new concept. As early as 1923, W.E.B. Du Bois's writing about anti-imperialist struggles shaped critical perspectives on international intervention. Similar discussions were taking place across the African continent. Leaders including Patrice Lumumba (DRC), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Louis Rwagasore (Burundi), and Tito Rutaremara (Rwanda), among others, also spoke outwardly about how liberation from colonial legacies was essential for newly formed African nations to survive and thrive. More recent scholarship has continued to interrogate frameworks built on colonial, patriarchal, and exploitative practices in international relations, law, and diplomacy.¹⁰ The edited volume *Decolonizing International Relations* "exposes the ways in which international relations has consistently ignored questions of colonialism, imperialism, race, slavery, and dispossession in the non-European world."¹¹ Research clusters at global universities have also focused on putting these theories into practice. *The Bukavu Series*, a collaboration between universities in Belgium and the DRC, is one such initiative. Through multimedia approaches, interviews, and reflective publications, the series explores power dynamics between researchers from the Global North and the Global South.

Researchers have focused on new methods that inform development and humanitarian assistance in ways that empower local communities. Participatory action research methods and community-based input-gathering processes like *Photovoice* aim to address existing power imbalances among nations, donors, universities, businesses, militaries, and governments in the Global North and the Global South.

From a scientific perspective, understanding the role of power, position, bias, and identity play in accessing information in diverse settings is key to robust, qualitative research. Identities—including age, economic class, nationality, race, gender, education, faith, language, legal status, and family life—impact power dynamics in all social and political relationships. Positionality and bias can be acknowledged, but never erased.

Traditional structures that reinforce power imbalances result in marginalization of the individuals and communities those in power aim to assist. This article proposes one way to address such circumstances. Research in comparative politics and social psychology about group identity concludes that various identities, including race, gender, religion, language, class, or citizenship form the basis for which citizens are perceived as an *in-group* or *out-group* members.¹² Shared identity between groups is sometimes manipulated by powerful leaders in society to create social divisions and cleavages as a means to maintain power. Manipulation of any of these identities can create mistrust and division between those in the *in-group* and the *out-group*. However, leveraging these factors can create a shared identity.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Building on prior theory and practices that interrogate marginalizing power structures, this article explores potential opportunities for language and culture to create a shared identity between those who hold power and

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those who lack it. Common identity created by language is one modest way to address equitable transformation of traditional power structures to include critical voices.

In his 2002 text “When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda,” Mahmood Mamdani identifies three different concepts of identity as a basis

for understanding cleavages and commonalities among Rwandans prior to the escalations that led to the genocide in 1994. Mamdani refers to economic, cultural, and political communities as different spaces where Rwandans constructed a shared identity.¹³ For Mamdani, “the cultural community of those who speak a single language, Kinyarwanda, can be thought of as separate from the political community of those who have lived within the boundaries of the state of Rwanda since sometime in the sixteenth century.”¹⁴ Expanding his argument, Mamdani says, “the parameters of the cultural community, defined by common language, are much larger than the state domain.”¹⁵ As such, people might share the same language but not the same social, national, or political community.

Community based on shared language, however, is rarely a sufficient

unifying factor. Ana María Relaño Pastor's reflections about her experiences with positionality and language as an ethnographic researcher highlight this point. Pastor concludes that interviews are "sites of struggle," where participants construct and negotiate representations of themselves and those they align with and distance themselves from.¹⁶ She discusses the potential of the interview to be a "site of empowerment,"¹⁷ during which sharing stories and discussions can be "a mutually transformative social practice between researchers and participants."¹⁸ This perspective is particularly applicable when considering language to address unequal power dynamics. This article applies Pastor's argument to the societal level.

Language can also be used to reinforce human hierarchies. Alastair Pennycook cites historical examples of language policy used by colonial powers to exclude, control, and subdue colonial subjects based on their lack of access to an imperial language.¹⁹ Accounting for context is particularly important in the case of when language is used to unite or divide. According to Pierre Bourdieu, "the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world and reorganizing that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity."²⁰

Understanding how shared language contributes to identity construction, in addition to the weight language carries in bridging socioeconomic and political divides, can help shift the balance of power, bridging divides between those with power (researchers, donors, wealthy governments), and those without (research subjects, beneficiaries, fragile or failed states, aid recipients). In this way, shared language becomes a vehicle for engaging communities who might otherwise be marginalized by the status quo processes embedded in political, military, and diplomatic practice. Language has the potential to offset some power inequalities, resulting in heightened senses of respect, trust, and common goals between parties from different power positions. This can result in a more dynamic and empowering relationship between different communities.

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CASE STUDY: UN PEACEKEEPERS IN RWANDA AND THE DRC

Theoretically, language can be a way to develop shared or common identity, allowing individuals to cross traditional barriers of class, race, geographic or national origin, legal status, education, gender, and age, among others. Language learning also promotes cultural and context-specific knowledge. Shared language results in increased cooperation and trust between a local community who might be suspicious of outsiders and their motives and the outsiders working in their community.

To elucidate the positive impact of shared language in breaking down power hierarchies, I focus on the case example of United Nations peacekeepers. The following analysis is based on oral history testimonies conducted with UN peacekeepers who served in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) in 1993 and 1994 and in the United Nations Organization Mission in Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC, the predecessor to MONUSCO) in 2003-2005. The main goal of the UNAMIR peacekeeping mission was to assist and monitor the implementation of the 1993 Arusha Accord peace agreement that would establish a power-sharing government. MONUC mission goals included protection of civilians and human rights defenders threatened by physical violence, and supporting the Government of the DRC in its stabilization and peace consolidation efforts.²¹

When asked about the official preparation for their peacekeeping missions, most soldiers interviewed said they tried to learn “the basics” of the local language where they were deployed. UN peacekeepers receive some language training prior to deployment, with the main emphasis on effective communication and negotiation, especially by working with language assistants. The UN Peacekeeping Pre-Deployment Training Standards (PDT), Specialized Training Material for Police (1st Edition 2009), describes challenging situations during which peacekeepers might have to communicate or negotiate with civilians or non-state actors:

“In a Peacekeeping Operation negotiation, mediation and even diplomatic activities not only have to be covered on the management/command level but especially on the practical level by all UN peacekeepers...Peacekeepers have to be prepared to negotiate and mediate conflicts on a daily basis, with people from different cultures, many times in a language that is not their mother tongue and often under tense or even threatening situations.”²²

These pre-deployment materials acknowledge the important role of language skills in deescalating tense and often dangerous situations.

However, the primary training focus is on working with language assistants, rather than employing language skills by the peacekeepers themselves.

Several peacekeepers that were interviewed shared their individual mission to acquire language skills, citing significantly increased cooperation and trust with local community members through shared language. One key informant interviewed for this research described language as a “modest bridge to achieving the bigger goals.” Wearing a military uniform is a statement of power and position that can be an immediate barrier between peacekeepers and local citizens. If peacekeepers are unable to find a way to build trust in the community where they are stationed, they will miss essential pieces of information that can help in maintaining stability for the community itself. This is a prime example of how traditional structures of power may marginalize certain voices and perspectives.

When serving with MONUC, one peacekeeper interviewed shared his concern about understanding the needs and motivations of the local community. He said, “we needed to understand where they were coming from to create engagement instead of conflict.” In DRC, he recalled that the Mission organized weekly French courses, and all soldiers were highly encouraged to attend. Individual soldiers also took the personal initiative to organize Lingala and Swahili study groups and to practice these languages on their own.

Although the peacekeepers knew it was unlikely for them to become fluent in the regional language of their deployment, several interview respondents shared stories of immediate changes in trust and interaction between the soldiers and community members when they began using the shared language. One soldier said, “people used to walk by, carrying and selling things. They would come to our position, but we didn’t speak their language. One day, a woman asked me, ‘what is your name?’ With her thick accent, I thought she was talking about my knee. She laughed at my interpretation, and we created a joke about it. Even *trying* to understand someone’s language diffuses and calms down situations and builds community relationships.”

As these soldiers were positioned in similar stations for weeks at a time, they used language to develop a rapport with the local community members. Language served as a building block for engagement in longer conversations. “Next time people come around to our position, they are more likely to engage and trust us, and we can find solutions.”²³ Informal ways of discussing issues also helped with the primary aim of securing and protecting certain vulnerable locations. With more open and informal communication between the peacekeepers and local citizens, people would

share information about the rebel groups and their movements, location, plans to attack, and strategies. This information helped keeping both peacekeepers and community members safe.

This case highlights one example of how existing power asymmetries could have—but did not end up being—a major barrier to effective communication. The peacekeepers interviewed recognized that working with the local language could build trust and show respect for local communities. As a singular case, the findings taken alone cannot be generalized. However, there is an abundance of research and anecdotal evidence showing how language can be used to offset substantial consequences arising from practices that reinforce exploitative power hierarchies.

Highlights of the interviewed peacekeepers' main goals and considerations regarding their decisions to engage in language learning include:

1. Building trust,
2. Negotiating or deescalating dangerous security situations,
3. Protecting human rights, based on personal values of assisting vulnerable communities, especially women, girls, religious or ethnic minorities, and political minorities,
4. Engaging with marginalized communities,
5. Reducing barriers created by power and position (e.g., between a soldier in uniform and national civilian),
6. Gaining information first-hand from community members and locals, and
7. Creating the best possibility for the mission to succeed and be accepted by the community it aims to protect.

The interviewed peacekeepers recognized that shared language both immediately communicates respect and generates efforts to assist on the part of the person with the higher-power position, shifting the relationship.

CONCLUSION: REDUCING POWER ASYMMETRIES THROUGH LANGUAGE

There is no quick fix to addressing unequal structural dynamics in international relations. However, the increasing number of programs and initiatives from different sectors demonstrate a growing effort to shift social norms and mindsets towards decolonizing patriarchal marginalizing systems that maintain inequality between the Global North and Global South in terms of expertise, perspectives, and voices. As this article shows,

shared language has the potential to enable a productive engagement with marginalized voices in multicultural contexts, and thus make a modest contribution to broader efforts.

The above evidence illustrates how language can be a vehicle for displaying shared values and respect. Through *engagement* with local languages, individual actors can attempt to reduce power asymmetry in cross-cultural interactions. Language learning also allows people to recognize important cultural and national values that could otherwise have been ignored or misunderstood and subsequently led to further marginalization of those who are least represented.

Language learning by “outsiders” shows respect and shared goals, may intrigue marginalized communities and invite them to engage more closely with “outsiders,” and provides opportunities for humor and other bonding to take place between structural actors in communities and those who otherwise would not have been able to share information or speak candidly. As such, language learning is an important preparation for actors working internationally for state, research, military, or diplomatic institutions. However, such language learning should extend beyond colonial languages. On one hand, Western languages play an important role in access and participation in the global economy, international education, and other spheres. On the other hand, hearing the same languages reminds many of enduring colonial legacies.

Returning to Mamdani’s theory of building a “community of language,”²⁴ the example of UN peacekeepers shows that individual attempts to acquire language skills when engaging in countries with different histories of military intervention balanced power dynamics within these peacekeepers’ positions in relation to the local populations. Even the most modest language learning helped reduce barriers created by power hierarchies. Unlike many individual
 identities, language learning is something that individuals can control. It is a powerful representation of respect and intention.

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How can individual practice of language apply in broader contexts?
 How do governments, diplomatic missions, aid organizations, and militaries prepare personnel with skills to navigate and function in different cultural contexts? By seeking to understand the norms, values, and practices of a particular place, including language, actors can shift the focus toward commonality rather than division.

Operating with a cross-cultural perspective and linguistic knowledge helps build trust and minimize risk, especially when working with victims of violent conflict. Greeting someone in their own language and sharing knowledge about key historical events shows respect for each individual situation. These culturally sensitive actions yielded significant results when working as a foreigner in conflict zones. If incorporated into international practice, they can serve to engage critical voices who would otherwise be marginalized by current practice. *f*

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