**IML Discourse I**

**NSU presents discourse on *language*, publicity, and strategic communication**

**Mr. Shameem Ahsan, Director General, former Head of the External Publicity Wing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, and former Deputy Chief of Bangladesh Diplomatic Mission in Washington DC, USA, presented a discourse on language, publicity and diplomatic communication at NSU’s Institute of Modern Languages on December 5, 2012. The event was the closing event of the Institute’s high-profile lecture series *IML Discourse I*. A good number of students of NSU attended the discourse *Language and Publicity.***

**Mr. Shameem Ahsan, who studied higher responsibility in direction and management of national security and defense at the National Defense College (NDC), Dhaka, discussed issues e.g. importance of appropriate language in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic interactions, official reactions to international developments and interpersonal communications etc.**



**Linguistics of communication and public diplomacy...**

Mr. Shameem Ahsan made it clear in his presentation that language is very important in publicity and mass communication and described at great length how certain languages played roles as languages of diplomacy in different phases of the history of the world. While giving a chronological description, he identified Latin, French and English to be preponderant languages used for diplomatic communications. According to Mr. Ahsan, “There is an undeniable advantage to use the English language in diplomacy ad mass communication.”

**Need for the right attitude...**

Prof. M. Shahedul Haque, Head of IML at NSU, spoke on language as a means of publicity and mass communication and said that, in a democratic country like Bangladesh, citizens have freedom of speech. People enjoy their right to voice their legitimate opinion and perspectives and express them in speech and writing. Students, as adult citizens of the country, have their worldviews and lifestyles, and they are constantly exposed to different types of concepts about society, politics, culture, religion etc. While students can choose their stance freely, Mr. Haque said that it is important to be moderate, tolerant, kind and considerate in their views as extremist views and actions are wrong and always fail.

**Before working on language, it is important to be moderate, kind, and tolerant as extremism always fails**

Language is the mirror of the mind. Therefore, Mr. Haque stressed, students should, first of all, develop the right attitude that can benefit the humanity. He reminded the students that they were the future of our nation and they should work sensibly to make a good image of the nation for the rest of the world.

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## The background...

The term *diplomacy* has derived from the Latin word diplomaticus, which probably referred to the publication of the Codex Juris Gentium Diplomaticus (1695), a collection of original important public documents, many of which dealt with international affairs.

The language English has gone through a historical path of over a thousand years before it becoming the recognized international “lingua franca”. It is a [West Germanic language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Germanic_language) that originated from the [Anglo-Frisian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Frisian) [dialects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialect) brought to [Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Britain) by [Germanic invaders](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germanic_tribes) and settlers from various parts of what is now northwest [Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germany) and the [Netherlands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlands). [Old English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_English) was a diverse group of dialects, reflecting the varied origins of the [Anglo-Saxon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxons) kingdoms of Britain. One of these dialects, [Late West Saxon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Saxon_dialect_%28Old_English%29), eventually became predominant. The Norman invasion occurred in 1066, and when literary English rose anew in the 13th century, it was based on the speech of North [London](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London), much closer to the centre of Scandinavian settlement. Technical and cultural vocabulary was largely derived from [Old Norman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Norman), with particularly heavy influence in the church, the courts, and government.

Now, at the beginning, the language English had been a language of common people, and all the political, religious, military and diplomatic activities were conducted in the language Latin. Henceforth, Latin is most probably the earliest example of a diplomatic language that controlled all the official works since it was the recording language of all the official documents. However, in course of time with the emergence of colonialism, English Language replaced Latin due to its more flexible nature, and of course with the expansion of British colonies, it eventually ended up being the lingua franca as well as the primary diplomatic language of the present world.

**The role of language in publicity and communication...**

The 45-minute-long speech was followed by a 30-minute session where students were encouraged to make queries. The event turned into a lively interactive session between the speaker and the audience that glimpsed into the intricate use of language surrounding diplomacy.

“Diplomacy is respecting the other nation,” asserted Mr. Ahsan, stating how even with the purest intention in mind, inappropriate language has the potential to harm negotiations. Even a joke may create avoidable embarrassments rather than injecting fresh air. The worst sort of a joke, according to him, arrives when racial, ethnic or cultural insensitivity seeps through, even when they are not intended to be used in a derogative way. Socially-correct terms such as “the visually-impaired” instead of “the blind” and “a differently-able person” instead of “a disabled person” are therefore better ways to demonstrate equal respect. Mr. Ahsan emphasized on applying nuances and niceties when the issue of communication comes in world diplomacy.

**Language and effective communication: A vision through first-hand occupational experience**

**A diplomat who says ‘yes’ means ‘maybe’  
A diplomat who says ‘maybe’ means ‘no’   
A diplomat who says ‘no’ is not a diplomat**

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand

According to the former Head of Publicity of the Foreign Office, effective communication implies taking responsibility for getting your own needs met in a way that preserves the dignity of other people. In essence this is an art of preserving the dignity of others.  An intelligent person can tell you something you don't want to hear and you will be thankful for the information when they are finished.

According to Mr. Ahsan, “There is an undeniable advantage to use the English language in foreign diplomacy,” Mr. Ahsan explained the importance of having a command over the most dominant international language when it comes to easier communication. Besides, “politeness, composure, discretion, and courtesy,” allows for “Cool and Calm both in written and oral communication. Circumstances are always changing; we must never acquire an imposing voice.” When it comes to disagreeing Mr. Ahsan says, a successful diplomat, and for that reason anyone interested to be discreet and *diplomatic,* has to be careful in phrasing his/her words carefully, and instead of saying “I disagree”, he should say, “I wish I could agree with you.” While responding to an international conflict, a diplomat has to be careful by saying: “My government cannot remain indifferent to recent developments in your country.”

While giving these examples of diplomatic language, Mr. Ahsan also emphasized the importance of avoiding racially offensive terms and jokes. He also explained the importance of using correct expressions for a diplomat while dealing with his or her counterpart. He explained this particular aspect with a reference to Hillary’s “Reset Button” case.

**Hillary’s “Reset”**

During the early days of Obama Administration, Hillary Clinton presented the “reset button” Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, intending to assure the Russians that the difficult days of the Bush administration were over, to be followed by Obama’s “smart diplomacy.” As it turned out, the word “reset” was misspelled in Russian–the Russian word on the button means “overcharge”.



On the surface it was a petty mistake, but when it comes to diplomacy, well it’s not that simple as it was supposed by the Russians that Hillary is [warning against](http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a5b15b14-3fcf-11e2-9f71-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2EKebDpsp) Russia’s attempt to re-establish the Soviet Union, exactly the concern that motivated the Bush-Cheney policy toward Russia- a small mistake of a very simple word might have led to a war!

**Language of the truth...**

Diplomacy doesn’t merely mean survival by servile compromise and thereby hiding the truth. Mr. Ahsan said: “Diplomacy means respecting the other country. We cannot ignore the truth about a country. Bangladesh suffers from overpopulation and poverty. But when addressing such a country we can always add a positive remark to protect people’s self-respect. Bangladesh is also a resilient nation of survivors against cataclysms such as flood and storms. Thus, give them the message, but do not hurt their patriotic feelings.”

When it comes to dealing with foreign countries in the present-day world of Globalization, Mr. Ahsan said “We all are *just a click away.”* This means globalization is nothing but sharing our resources even if we are scattered all over the world with polar distances between us. It is because of this communication technology that we can be shared, and even our country is able to share brand-images and resources that are unavailable to First-world nations. According to diplomatic concepts globalization is nothing but the communization of the entire world.

**Linguistic Finesse...**

Emphasis was also given on linguistic subtlety as an art of expression: “Politeness, composure, discretion, and courtesy, allows for cool and calm both in written and verbal communication.” Mr. Ahsan feels that a diplomat has to be careful and is not expected to say “I don’t agree” straightway, rather the suitable idea to convey the same in a different way such as “I wish I could agree with you/We are not perhaps together”’. In the context of exposing a barely credible point by one’s counterpart outright, a diplomat should not say “ Are you lying?”, rather discreetly ask “Are you sure?” Instead of directly terming contents of a statement “ blatant lies”, a diplomat would prefer to mention it as being “untrue.” Customs are a delicate matter even when one proceeds to respond to “thank you” received from another official: “If the person is of equal or of close rank, it is suitable to say ‘my pleasure’ but it is particularly important to respond to a senior dignitary’s gratitude with a ‘my privilege’ instead.”

**Politeness, composure, discretion, and courtesy underpin effective written and verbal communications**

Before inviting a potential dignitary to a lunch or dinner, one ought to ask for a permission of invitation from the dignitary first. The idea would be to avoid an imposing tone. Even in the smallest of requests, such as while asking for a document “at the earliest,” Mr. Ahsan advised his audience to write “at an early date.” as the former may sound too harsh! To respond to an international conflict, a diplomat may convey a message of subtle warning when he says that, “My government cannot remain indifferent to recent developments in .......” “Such nuances and niceties,” Mr. Ahsan explained, “are nothing but finer expressions of communication which need to be cultivated by diplomats.”

**Making friends carefully...**

By the end of the lecture’s question-answer session a student in the class asked Mr. Ahsan a critical yet a funny question – “*There is a saying that the state that becomes a friend of USA doesn’t need any enemy of her own — how would you justify it diplomatically sir?”* Mr. Ahsan’s answer was “First of all, why be enemies with anyone at all? As both a diplomat and an individual you should try to avoid making enemies. Even Britain’s imperialism required intelligence, we cannot ignore that. Can you imagine that being a country of half of the size of Bangladesh, England (the main British Island) ruled almost whole of the world? It is just because of their shrewd diplomatic intelligence. Although they are often labeled as ruthless bloodsuckers, yet you cannot help appreciating their intelligence. If one can benefit from a friendship even with a bad person, it’s still a benefit. Isolationism leads to rogue states. We must remember the need for others, and the need we have for each other. The idea is to be friendly to everyone.”

**Tactful and tailored language...**

Publicity and diplomatic communication are the ability toexpress your feelings, needs, legitimate rights or opinions in a inoffensive fashion. Like Russian president Vladimir Putin ones quipped: ***"Diplomacy is the art of telling someone to go to Hell in such a way that he looks forward to the journey!"***

**The do’s:**

* Respect the wants, needs, point of views and feelings of others
* Use indirect language such as ‘It looks like’ and ‘I think’ rather aggressive language such as ‘you always’ and ‘you never’
* Don't interrupt other people when they are talking
* Try to listen first
* Be aware of manipulators
* Try to find out how they are trying manipulating you
* Listen and let people ask questions for clarification
* Take a problem-solving approach
* Concentrate on facts not feelings
* If you are pressed by your adversary, then avoid direct response by pointing out that this is not right time. Tell the person you'll take up the subject again at another time, then leave, while the temper cools down. Or you can remain calm, steer the conversation back to the original point, try to understand the other person’s point of view and try to get to a common ground. It’s easier not to take things personally.
* Make a conscious decision that you want to be diplomatic rather than aggressive
* When saying no, be decisive but not overly apologetic
* Analyze past instances, try to talk in more diplomatic way alone or with a friend
* Do not give in to interruptions until you have completed your thoughts. Say, “Just a moment, I haven’t finished.”
* Avoid exaggerated behaviors, do not do too much of smiling, nodding, tilting, or blinking of eyes

**The Don’ts:**

**1. Do not use 'finger pointing' statements with the word 'you'**

Don't say: *You don't understand me.*

Say: *Perhaps I'm not making myself clear.*

Don't say: *You didn't explain this point.*

Say: *I didn't understand this point.*

Don't say: *You need to give us a better price.*

Say: *We're looking for a better price.*

**2. Do not be Impatient, Listen and be understanding:** Listening is a very effective tool for gaining other’s respect and attention, **and after listening to your adversary phrase your words like these:**

*Don't just say "I disagree"*

*Say:*

*Yes, but...*

*I see what you mean, but...*

*I agree up to a point, but*

*I think we should wait until a better opportunity comes along.*

*Yes, but we might not get another opportunity like this for a while.*

*I think we should ask for a 20% discount because it will show them that we are serious.*

*I see what you mean, but I think 20% might be a bit too much. It might put them off.*

**3. Do not use overtly formal and semantically opaque expressions, rather use plain words to soften your statements**

Don't say: *I don't like it*

Say: *I don't really like it I'm afraid*

Don't say: *Can I say something?*

Say: *Can I just say something here?*

Don't say: *I didn't catch that*

Say: *Sorry, I didn't quite catch that*

**4. Don’t hesitate to say the magic word: Sorry**

*Sorry, but can I just say something here*

*Sorry, but I don't really agree*

*Sorry, but I think that's out of the question*

**5. Do not use negative words - instead use positive words in a negative form**

Don't say: *I think that's a bad idea.*

Say: *I don't think that's such a good idea.*

Let's go for a good cop, bad cop approach in this negotiation!

*I don't think that's such a good idea. They might see through it.*

**About Body Language:**

* Keep your face relaxed
* Consciously relax your shoulders
* Speak in a normal conversational volume. Don't scream or get excited. Don’t whisper, either, as you will not be taken seriously
* Breathe normally. Don't hold your breath
* Hold your body upright and keep your posture open and relaxed
* Maintain good eye contact

**Languages of publicity and mass communication...**

When asked if diplomacy merely meant survival, Mr. Ahsan responded: “No, diplomacy means respecting the other country and people.” We cannot ignore the truth about us: “Bangladesh is climatically vulnerable,” but when addressing a nation we can always add a positive note to maintain our respect: “Bangladesh is also a role model in adaptation measures; a resilient nation of survivors against cataclysms such as flood and storms.” Publicity plays a role to expand, to explain, and to expose events to the public; there is a positive as well as a negative connotation to it, the worst being “propaganda”. Public diplomacy is tasked with the job to foster a greater understanding of a country and its foreign policy concerns. It also aims to create a positive imprint in the minds of the world publics and dispel misperceptions about the country and its policies. This becomes easier with the use of carefully crafted diplomatic language- Mr. Ahsan continued.“Diplomats should have command over dominant foreign languages as learning of foreign languages and its use in its native environment gives unique access to the people, culture and the national characteristics of that country-said Mr. Ahsan. “Globalization implies that we do not exist alone in the world.” He explained how Latin was the international language of diplomacy in Europe until the 18th-century, followed by French in the middle of the 19th-century, similarly today we have the advantages of English. “The UN had originally designated five languages as official: English, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian, with Chinese being included later. We must never forget the need we have for others and of each other in an increasingly globalized, networked and interconnected,” Mr. Ahsan emphasized.

**Need for the total communicative competence**

The idiom “reading between the lines” implies the idea of discovering hidden information. However, to be a good diplomat and a careful user of the language you use, mere reading between the lines is not enough. In fact, if you want to be successful in public diplomacy, you have *read* between the lines, *see* between the lines, *hear* between the lines, *write* between the lines, and even *speak* between the lines, and this is what we call in linguistics “the total communicative competence in a language of the world”.

***Written by a participant in the event***