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“Multilingualism” in Digital Diplomacy: Linguistic Characteristics and Socio-Political Implications

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Keywords: Digital diplomacy, multilingualism, language choice, soft power, linguistic inequality, global communication, **legitimacy, power, discourse.**

The rapid digitalization of diplomatic practice has transformed how states communicate, negotiate, and project influence in the global arena. This article examines the role of multilingualism as a strategic, political, and sociocultural component of digital diplomacy. While much scholarship has focused on technological innovation and communication efficiency, linguistic choices often subtle yet deeply consequential remain underexplored.

Drawing on theoretical perspectives from sociolinguistics, communication studies, and international relations, the study analyzes how language selection shapes visibility, accessibility, legitimacy, and soft-power projection in digital environments. It further discusses the challenges posed by global language hierarchies, machine-translation reliance, and linguistic inequalities that can marginalize certain communities in international discourse.

The paper argues that multilingualism is not merely a technical feature of digital communication but a political act embedded in power relations, cultural identity formation, and global governance. Ultimately, the article positions multilingualism as a core element of contemporary digital diplomacy and a prerequisite for equitable global communication in the digital age.

Բազմալեզվությունը թվային դիվանագիտության մեջ. լեզվական առանձնահատկությունները և սոցիալ-քաղաքական հետևանքները

Աննա Թարոյան

Երևանի պետական համալսարան, Անգլիական բանասիրության ամբիոնի հայցորդ, Անգլերեն լեզվի թիվ 1 ամբիոնի ավագ լաբորանտ

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Հիմնաբառեր՝ Թվային դիվանագիտություն, բազմալեզվություն, լեզվական ընտրություն
փափուկ ուժ, լեզվական անհավասարություն, գլոբալ
Հաղորդակցություն, լեզվատիմություն, իշխանություն, դիսկուրս:

Դիվանագիտական պրակտիկայի արագ թվայնացումը արմատապես փոխել է այն ձևերը, որոնց միջոցով պետությունները հաղորդակցվում են, բանակցում և ազդեցություն են գործադրում գլոբալ հարթակում: Սույն հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է բազմալեզվության դերը՝ որպես թվային դիվանագիտության ռազմավարական, քաղաքական և սոցիոմշակութային բաղադրիչ: Թեև գիտական գրականության մեծ մասը կենտրոնացած է տեխնոլոգիական նորարարությունների և հաղորդակցության արդյունավետության վրա, լեզվական ընտրությունները հաճախ մնում են համեմատաբար քիչ ուսումնասիրված:

Հենվելով սոցիոլեզվաբանության, հաղորդակցության ուսումնասիրությունների և միջազգային հարաբերությունների տեսական մոտեցումների վրա՝ հետազոտությունը վերլուծում է, թե ինչպես է լեզվի ընտրությունը ձևավորում տեսանելիությունը, մատչելիությունը, լեզվատիմությունը և «փափուկ ուժի» դրսևորումը թվային միջավայրերում: Հոդվածում նաև քննարկվում են գլոբալ լեզվական հիերարխիաներից, մեքենայական թարգմանության վրա գերազանցապես ապավինելուց և լեզվական անհավասարություններից բխող մարտահրավերները, որոնք կարող են մարզինալացնել որոշ համայնքներ միջազգային դիսկուրսում:

Բազմալեզվությունը թվային հաղորդակցության պարզապես տեխնիկական առանձնահատկություն չէ, այլ քաղաքական ակտ՝ ներգրավված իշխանական հարաբերությունների, մշակութային ինքնության ձևավորման և գլոբալ կառավարման գործընթացներում: Վերջիվերջո, հոդվածը բազմալեզվությունը ներկայացնում է որպես ժամանակակից թվային դիվանագիտության հիմնարար տարր և թվային դարաշրջանում արդար և ներառական գլոբալ հաղորդակցության նախապայման:

Многоязычие в цифровой дипломатии: лингвистические особенности и социально-политические последствия

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Ключевые слова: цифровая дипломатия, многоязычие, языковой выбор, мягкая сила, языковое неравенство, глобальная коммуникация, легитимность, власть, дискурс.

Стремительная цифровизация дипломатической практики коренным образом изменила способы, с помощью которых государства осуществляют коммуникацию, ведут переговоры и проецируют влияние на глобальной арене. В данной статье рассматривается роль многоязычия как стратегического, политического и социокультурного компонента цифровой дипломатии. Несмотря

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на то, что значительная часть научных исследований сосредоточена на технологических инновациях и эффективности коммуникации, языковые выборы зачастую тонкие, но глубоко значимые, остаются недостаточно изученными.

Опираясь на теоретические подходы социолингвистики, исследований коммуникации и международных отношений, автор анализирует, каким образом выбор языка влияет на видимость, доступность, легитимность и проекцию «мягкой силы» в цифровых средах. В статье также рассматриваются вызовы, связанные с глобальными языковыми иерархиями, чрезмерной зависимостью от машинного перевода и языковым неравенством, которые могут маргинализировать отдельные сообщества в международном дискурсе.

В работе утверждается, что многоязычие является не просто технической характеристикой цифровой коммуникации, а политическим актом, встроенным в отношения власти, процессы формирования культурной идентичности и глобального управления. В итоге статья позиционирует многоязычие как ключевой элемент современной цифровой дипломатии и необходимое условие справедливой и инклюзивной глобальной коммуникации в цифровую эпоху.

* * *

Introduction. “Diplomacy”, the art of managing relations between nations, has always been shaped by the tools of communication available. Imagine a world without telephones and the Internet. This was the reality for much of human history. Communication relied on messengers to reversing vast distances carrying scrolls and letters. These messengers were the diplomats of their time responsible for conveying vital information between Kingdoms and Empires. One fascinating example is the manner of letters, a collection of clay tablet letters dating back to the 14th century BC. Discovered in Egypt, these tablets reveal a complex web of communication between the Egyptian pharaoh and the rulers in the Near East, written in the Akkadian language of the day. These letters covered methods of trait, marriage allowances and even regional conflicts.

The invention of the printing press in the 14th century revolutionized the communication making it possible to spread the information more widely and rapidly. This had a profound impact on diplomacy, allowing for the dissemination of treaties, agreements and other diplomatic documents on an unprecedented scale. This paved the way for greater transparency and accountability in international relations.

In the 19th century the invention of the telegraph marked another turning point. Suddenly messages could be transmitted across continents in a matter of minutes. This near-instantaneous communication transformed diplomacy, allowing the governments to respond to the events in real time and coordinate their actions more effectively. The latter half of the 20th century witnessed the rise of computers and the Internet, ushering in the digital age and fundamentally changing how we communicate and interact. For diplomacy this digital revolution has been nothing short of transformative.

Ministries of Foreign Affairs, embassies, international organizations, as well as individual diplomats have entered a new communicative environment characterized by speed, visibility, and global reach.

Today, digital diplomacy has become a key tool for shaping national narratives, engaging foreign publics, responding to crises, and representing national identity on the global stage.

The internet created unprecedented opportunities, enabling governments to communicate with one another as well as with citizens of different countries. Email became a primary means of communication, allowing diplomats to exchange information rapidly and efficiently, regardless of geographical location. The electronic transfer of documents facilitated negotiations and streamlined the drafting and signing of agreements. Diplomats began to work faster and more efficiently on projects without losing time, reducing delays and their negative consequences.

Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram marked a new stage in digital diplomacy. These platforms allowed governments to engage directly with global audiences, bypassing traditional media. This new form of public diplomacy often referred to as “Twiplomacy” or “Facebook diplomacy” has become an essential component of managing states’ international reputations and communicating foreign policy messages. But beneath these technological changes lies a fundamental element that requires deeper study: “the language.”

Language is not merely a tool of communication. It is an expression of culture, a carrier of identity, a manifestation of power, and a strategic instrument in international relations. In the digital age, when messages spread instantaneously and audiences surpass national borders, linguistic choices become even more significant.

When diplomats and states *communicate* on digital platforms, the languages they choose often subtly, but sometimes explicitly signal their geopolitical orientation, cultural values, and target audiences.

First and foremost, language shapes visibility and accessibility. A message published in only one language may reach millions but simultaneously exclude millions. Multilingual content broadens participation, deepens mutual understanding, and allows states to connect with communities that might otherwise remain outside international dialogue.

Language carries symbolic and political meaning. Communicating in English may signal a desire to reach a global audience. French, as a historic diplomatic language, highlights diplomatic tradition. The use of Arabic, Spanish, Russian, or Chinese demonstrates respect for large linguistic communities and strategic regions. Even regional or minority languages send a powerful message of inclusion and cultural recognition.

Multilingualism enhances soft power. When a state promotes its language on digital platforms, it simultaneously disseminates its culture, literature, values, and worldview. The global popularity of Korean culture and the growing visibility of the Korean language is a good example of how linguistic identity can translate into international influence. The same applies to China’s promotion of Mandarin. Chinese diplomat Zhao Lijian became well known for his outspoken Twitter posts as part of China’s digital strategy, including critical commentary on international issues that reached millions of followers and sparked global attention.

- *For example, he used Twitter to post messages condemning alleged actions by another country’s forces in one published case, sparking a diplomatic controversy with Australia over the content and imagery.*

Mandarin Chinese is used for projecting China’s soft power and often in posts about cooperation, development, and global initiatives (BRI, Confucius Institutes).

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Embassies increasingly rely on multilingual posts, while the multilingual communication of the UN, WHO, and other organizations ensures global accessibility. In this context, language is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

- *India’s Ministry of External Affairs (@MEAIndia) and its missions use Twitter for updates on bilateral visits, travel advisories, and diplomatic engagements (as part of its longstanding digital diplomacy strategy).*

U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul became well-known for using Twitter to communicate directly and candidly during his time as the United States Ambassador to Russia, often bypassing traditional diplomatic channels to engage foreign audiences and express clear political opinions. One notable instance occurred in March 2022, when McFaul posted a tweet asserting that there were “no more ‘innocent’ Russians” in relation to Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine and calling for large-scale protest as a means to end the conflict. He later deleted and apologized for the phrasing, noting that his wording was imprecise even though he stood by the underlying argument. Here is the translated excerpt of that tweet:

“There are no more ‘innocent’ ‘neutral’ Russians anymore. Everyone has to make a choice: support or oppose this war. The only way to end this war is if 100,000s, not thousands, protest against this senseless war.” Michael McFaul. March 2, 2022.

The tweet sparked widespread criticism for its generalization and was later deleted, with McFaul acknowledging that the wording was imprecise. This episode illustrates how digital platforms enable diplomats and former officials to communicate political judgments directly, bypassing institutional filters, but also how such communication can generate significant diplomatic and ethical controversy.

McFaul’s Twitter activity demonstrates how **language choice, tone, and immediacy** in digital diplomacy can transform diplomatic discourse from negotiated messaging into a form of public political argumentation, thereby reshaping the boundaries of diplomatic practice in the digital age.

Earlier in his tenure, McFaul often tweeted in both English and Russian to reach local audiences directly. One example that attracted attention (and some amusement among Russian-speaking users) was his post in Russian, where he wrote:

«Победа! Привет ВВП» [*“Victory! Regards to VVP.” — referring to Vladimir Putin by his initials*] Michael McFaul (@McFaul), November 7, 2018.

This kind of tweet mixing **local language use with political messaging** highlights a different form of digital diplomatic engagement. Through tweets in the host country’s language, McFaul made his voice more accessible but also more provocative to online audiences.

British diplomats have actively used Twitter for rapid and direct communication, particularly during crises. Former UK Foreign Secretary **Dominic Raab** frequently used Twitter to issue concise, action-oriented messages addressed to both domestic and international audiences.

A representative example is his tweet during the Afghanistan evacuation crisis in **August 2021**:

“The UK will continue evacuations from Kabul for as long as it is safe to do so. We will not abandon those who have worked with us.” Dominic Raab (@DominicRaab)

This tweet illustrates a **plain, reassurance-focused style**, prioritizing clarity and immediacy over diplomatic ambiguity. The language reflects the British tradition of pragmatic public communication in digital diplomacy, especially in emergency contexts.

French diplomats often use Twitter to promote **normative positions**, particularly regarding international law, sovereignty, and human rights. Former French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs **Jean-Yves Le Drian** frequently articulated France's official stance in a declarative and principled tone.

“La France condamne avec la plus grande fermeté l’agression militaire russe contre l’Ukraine. Cette violation grave du droit international ne restera pas sans conséquences.”
[“France condemns in the strongest terms Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine. This serious violation of international law will not go unanswered.”] Jean-Yves Le Drian (@JY_LeDrian)

The use of **French**, combined with strong normative vocabulary, reflects France’s diplomatic tradition of emphasizing **legal legitimacy and moral authority** while addressing both national and international audiences.

In the Middle East, digital diplomacy often relies on **multilingual communication** to reach diverse regional and global audiences. The official Twitter account of the **Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs** regularly publishes parallel content in **English, Hebrew, and Arabic**, adapting tone and framing depending on the target audience.

An example from **May 2021**, during heightened tensions in Gaza, reads:

“Israel has the right to defend itself against rocket attacks targeting its civilians.”
— Israel MFA (@IsraelMFA)

The same message was simultaneously released in Arabic, aimed at regional audiences. This strategy demonstrates how multilingual digital diplomacy is used not only to inform but also to **frame narratives differently across linguistic communities**, highlighting the strategic role of language choice in conflict communication.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that digital diplomacy on Twitter varies significantly across political cultures:

- The *UK* emphasizes clarity and crisis responsiveness.
- *France* foregrounds norms, legality, and diplomatic tradition through formal language.
- *Middle Eastern actors* often adopt multilingual, narrative-driven strategies to engage fragmented and politically sensitive audiences.

These cases confirm that linguistic choice, tone, and platform use are not neutral but reflect deeper **socio-political priorities and diplomatic identities** in the digital age.

Country / Diplomat	Language(s) Used	Tone and Style	Primary Function in Digital Diplomacy
United States (Michael McFaul)	English; occasional Russian	Direct, blunt, normative, confrontational	Bypassing traditional diplomatic mediation; mobilizing public opinion; framing moral responsibility

Country / Diplomat	Language(s) Used	Tone and Style	Primary Function in Digital Diplomacy
United Kingdom (Dominic Raab / UK officials)	English	Concise, pragmatic, reassurance-oriented	Crisis communication; public reassurance; rapid information dissemination
France (Jean-Yves Le Drian / MFA)	French; English (secondary)	Formal, declarative, value-based	Normative positioning; defense of international law; projection of diplomatic authority
Israel (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	Hebrew; English; Arabic	Strategic, narrative-driven, security-focused	Audience-specific framing; legitimacy construction; conflict narrative management
Middle East (Gulf States – official MFA accounts)	Arabic; English	Polished, institutional, image-conscious	Nation branding; soft power projection; international reputation management

This comparison highlights how linguistic choice and communicative tone on Twitter are shaped by geopolitical context, diplomatic culture, and strategic objectives. While U.S. digital diplomacy exemplified by Michael McFaul often prioritizes normative clarity and direct engagement, British communication emphasizes crisis management and reassurance. French digital diplomacy foregrounds legal and moral legitimacy through formal language, whereas Middle Eastern diplomats rely heavily on multilingual and audience-adapted messaging to manage security narratives and international image. The table demonstrates that multilingualism in digital diplomacy functions not merely as a technical tool but as a strategic and political resource.

Despite its significant potential, multilingual digital diplomacy brings a number of challenges. **The first** challenge is the cost and complexity of maintaining multilingual communication. Accurate translation, cultural adaptation, and terminological precision require professional resources. Even a small error can create diplomatic tensions. **The second** challenge is the dominance of global languages, especially English. Although English facilitates international communication, it often overshadows smaller languages, creating linguistic inequality. Overreliance on machine translation can also lead to distortions of meaning. **The third** challenge is linguistic justice and inclusivity. Not all languages enjoy equal visibility in the digital sphere, which leaves certain communities outside international discourse. Overcoming these challenges requires technology, training, and political will.

Socio-Political Implications

Ultimately, multilingualism is not merely a technical requirement, it is a socio-political phenomenon. Linguistic choices can:

- shape perceptions of legitimacy,

- reflect power relations between states,
- promote the preservation of cultural identity,
- strengthen democratic participation,
- support inclusivity in global governance.

Thus, multilingualism is not just a communication strategy; it is a political act with real consequences.

Looking ahead, it is clear that multilingualism must remain central to digital diplomacy. This can be achieved through:

1. the implementation of high-quality translation and interpretation services, including AI-supported tools;
2. the development of multilingual digital platforms and websites;
3. promoting linguistic justice by increasing the visibility of minority languages;
4. training diplomats in cultural and linguistic sensitivity;
5. international cooperation for sharing best practices and innovations.

Through these efforts, diplomacy will become more inclusive, more effective, and more responsive to a changing world.

This topic is highly relevant because modern digital diplomacy requires multilingual, culturally sensitive, and inclusive communication. Linguistic choices have become political signals, tools for shaping public perception, and essential elements of international cooperation especially in today's environment. Studying multilingualism helps us understand how states build relationships and ensure informational security in the digital era.

Modern diplomacy has shifted to digital platforms where states, embassies, and international organizations actively communicate. In this environment, language becomes a central factor influencing accessibility, perception, and impact.

Languages used in digital communication reflect geopolitical priorities, international partnerships, and value systems. Thus, linguistic policy directly influences a state's international image.

Digital diplomacy targets diverse audiences across cultures, languages, and regions. Multilingualism becomes a tool for ensuring equality, accessibility, and effective communication.

During crises, war, pandemics, natural disasters accurate multilingual communication helps prevent panic, counter disinformation, and ensure public safety. States increasingly compete to internationalize their languages and cultures. Social networks have become tools of soft power where language functions as an instrument of influence.

Despite technological progress, many languages remain invisible online, deepening cultural inequalities and limiting certain groups' participation in international dialogue.

Conclusion: In a world where political messages spread at unprecedented speed where global problems demand collective solutions and public opinion transcends borders multilingualism is not an optional extra; it is a cornerstone of modern diplomacy.

- Language builds bridges.
- Language shapes identities.
- Language carries power.

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And when language is used consciously and responsibly in the digital sphere, it strengthens international cooperation, deepens mutual understanding, and contributes to the creation of a more just and inclusive global society. Therefore, multilingualism must be viewed not only as a linguistic asset but also as a diplomatic responsibility.

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