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Language and Conflict Resolution: The Limits of English

Raymond Cohen

Conflict resolution is a basic human activity articulated and conducted in forms that significantly vary across cultures. Differences in approach rest on contrasting understandings of the nature of conflict and society. A good way to study these differences is through a comparative analysis of language. A pilot study comparing Arabic, English, and Hebrew indicates that the model of conflict resolution implicit in English terminology is merely one possible way to depict reality. To non-English speakers it may even appear idiosyncratic. Arabic and Hebrew convey alternative versions of conflict resolution, not just carbon copies of a privileged, English original.¹ Linguistic analysis points to four primary dimensions of conflict resolution, along which significant conceptual variations, reflected in language, can be detected.² These dimensions consist of assumptions about the causes and nature of conflict; expectations of the mechanics and objectives of conflict resolution; understanding of what it means for a conflict to have been settled; and preference for rituals appropriate for affirming and symbolizing the restoration of harmonious relations at the end of conflict.

While it is legitimate for English speakers to use their native-language paradigm as a baseline against which to measure non-English versions, speakers of

¹In its original, dogmatic form, this thesis is associated with Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. See David G. Mandelbaum, ed., *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1963); John B. Carroll, ed., *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956). George Steiner considers the theory's literary implications in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 2d ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1992). For an important personal account, see Eva Hoffmann, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989).

²Language is best thought of as shaping expectations rather than determining thought. For a modified version of the Sapir-Whorf thesis, see Raymond Cohen, "Meaning, Interpretation and International Negotiation," *Global Society* 14, No. 3 (2000), p. 325.

other languages are equally entitled to consider their own paradigms as normative. It is clear that conflict resolution should be studied with full regard for the source language in which it is articulated and conducted. Doubt must be cast on the working assumption that foreign languages can be ignored in research because general models of behavior—or propositions about behavior, based on English-language sources and expressed in English—capture an objective reality somehow beyond culture.

The starting point for this study is the view that communal life is possible only because members of a community possess a set of shared meanings, enabling them to make coherent sense of the world. This stock of meaning constitutes the common sense of the community and underpins all communication and organized activity. The mother tongue is the main repository of a community's common sense. Other systems of symbolic meaning that demarcate communities include religion, popular culture, and nonverbal behavior.

Among the most crucial activities of a community is its handling of conflict, for unless it can contain disagreement and control violence, it has little hope of surviving. For this reason, the subject of conflict resolution has been of great theoretical and practical interest to researchers at both the domestic and international levels.

From the premise that language constitutes a community's shared stock of meaning, we can conclude that the study of language may provide an excellent entry point for investigating how members of a group understand and handle conflict. A comparative study of conciliation vocabularies reveals that concepts that seem self-evident and straightforward to the native English speaker may weigh significantly differently in other languages or not exist at all. Cross-cultural differences in the depiction of reality are hard to accept, precisely because we take the picture of the world conveyed by our native language to be self-evident and project it onto everyone else.

Cross-linguistic comparison reveals much about other societies and provokes thought about our own. It is also expedient since the resolution of intercultural conflict, already salient in multicultural societies, is likely to become increasingly significant in an interdependent world. When paradigms of conflict resolution clash, conceptual and technical contradictions have to be addressed if they are to be overcome. Alternatively, different emphases and approaches may create unexpected synergies and scope for creative conflict resolution.

A SEMANTIC APPROACH

A semantic approach, involving the comparison of the meaning of key terms across languages, is adopted here to study cross-cultural variations in conflict resolution. This approach is advocated as effective and parsimonious because communication is essential in conflict resolution. As a complex, interconnected

chain of nonverbal and verbal messages and moves, conciliation can advance only when there is synchronized and consecutive understanding at every stage of the process. For information to be comprehensibly exchanged and the issues at stake to be discussed, the parties must be able to draw on a shared store of meaning. Yet before they can meaningfully discuss substance, a difficult enough task in itself, they must first arrive at a metaunderstanding of form and procedure. To negotiate peace, rivals must agree on what it is “to negotiate” and what “peace” is. Looking at language rather than culture as such also helps to avoid cultural stereotyping and sidesteps inconclusive theoretical debates about the nature of culture.

Different languages convey different versions of reality. To grasp what people think about, for example, the term “reconciliation,” we must first find out what they mean by the equivalent concept in their own language. What they will expect of reconciliation will be informed by the local knowledge that informs their understanding of the term. If reconciliation implies in their language the replacement of hatred by love, then different conduct will be appropriate than if it simply means restoring the routine of day-to-day life. Of course, what the protagonists actually do in a given situation depends on circumstances, though we would expect clear patterns of behavior to emerge in aggregate. By comparing and contrasting the semantic fields and connotations of concepts like “conflict” and “resolution” in various languages, we can shed light on similarities and differences. At a practical level, this can help identify potential pitfalls and openings in real life conflict resolution across cultures.

Enormous progress has been made in recent decades in the study of conflict resolution, and a voluminous body of work has been produced that would be hard to summarize briefly.³ Most of the literature looks at the subject generically, which means that common structural features of conflict resolution that cut across cultures are emphasized. Usually, the assumption of universality is implicit. P.H. Gulliver explicitly compares and contrasts the negotiation of disputes in different cultures in order to reveal the underlying and invariant logic of the process. His point of departure is “the hypothesis that there are common patterns and regularities of interaction between the parties in negotiation, irrespective of the particular context or the issues in dispute.”⁴ This approach seems justified in the first instance because the major categories of conflict resolution in English—negotiation, adjudication, mediation, and arbitration—appear to

³ For a recent overview, see Karin Aggestam, *Reframing and Resolving Conflict: Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations 1988–1998* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1999), pp. 16–25.

⁴ P.H. Gulliver, *Disputes and Negotiations: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), pp. 64–65.

be more or less universal and share family similarities. Moreover, at the foundation of a discipline it is appropriate to establish a shared conceptual framework, even if this means temporarily setting aside anomalies.

Gulliver's hypothesis on the assumption of universality has paid off handsomely at both the theoretical and applied levels. It has brought us to the point where there is an established discipline and substantial consensus—at least in much of the English-speaking world (Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States)—about the utility of integrative bargaining and alternative (or appropriate) dispute resolution (ADR) techniques. Ethics aside, there is growing acceptance that disagreements are rarely handled effectively by a preoccupation with relative gain at others' expense, mindless intransigence, or violence. The problem-solving approach to conflict resolution maintains that real needs rather than tactical positions should be addressed, and creativity and pragmatism applied to the settlement of differences. Where necessary, the skills of trained third parties are drawn upon. Nobody is considered to possess a monopoly of truth and justice, and outcomes are sought that leave neither triumphalist winners nor embittered losers. As Jeffrey Rubin felicitously put it: "Rather than view negotiation as a tug of war in which each of two sides attempts to surrender as little of its aspirations as possible, the mutual gains approach regards negotiation as a puzzle to be solved."⁵

It is a testimony to the success of Gulliver's hypothesis that we can now confidently loosen the assumption of universality and focus on more culturally specific features of conflict resolution. There is a good reason for this switch in emphasis from points of resemblance to variations across cultures. As long as the onus is on conflict resolution within reasonably homogenous societies, or within communities dominated by a hegemonic culture, there is no pressing need to investigate variety. As societies grow increasingly multicultural and globalization leads to a burgeoning of contacts across societies, differences become more salient. Ironically, the more the international system resembles a global community, the more opportunity there is for abrasion. Contact promotes not only understanding, but also contention.

A good point at which to start a linguistic and cultural exercise of this kind is the commonplace observation that the meaning of a word is lodged within the way of life and outlook of the society that speaks it. By "meaning," I allude to reference, usage, and connotations, not just dictionary definition. Languages do not exist in isolation as abstract systems of signs but within unique, organic habitats, complex ecologies of sensibility and interaction. This is another way

⁵ Jeffrey Z. Rubin, "Western Perspectives on Conflict Resolution," in Paul Salem, ed., *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays* (Beirut: American University, 1997), p. 7.

of saying that language and culture are inseparable; language reflects culture and culture is reproduced by language.

Across languages and societies, seemingly functionally equivalent words may depict variant versions of reality. This will be less true of simple, universal objects (stone, leaf, knife) and more true of abstract ideas and social constructs (family, teenager, democracy). Each variant has its own characteristic allusions, flavor, and appropriate range and context of usage. Rooted in a certain cultural soil, words do not always travel well. It is hard to convey the ideas of “homeless” or “retirement colony” adequately in cultures where the group comes first, and it is almost unthinkable for people (especially aged parents) to be detached from the bosom of their families. When the interpreter tries to transfer such concepts from one habitat to another, their essence may be “lost in translation.”

To visualize this point, imagine that words cover semantic fields that can be mapped out. In English, a given word occupies a certain space, which then becomes the *common sense* meaning of the word to native English speakers. The foreign language equivalent may cover more or less space, including meanings not present in the first language, while excluding others. The connotations of the word also may differ across languages for religious, historical, or environmental reasons. If a map of a word in English is placed over a map of the word, say, in Arabic, they may be seen to occupy overlapping but not identical areas. The very act of comparison provides insight into how the two societies separately understand and value the segment of the world referred to by the word. The assumption is that the greater the cultural gap between the ways of life of societies, the greater the potential semantic gap between concepts and their labels across languages. It is easier to translate Robert Frost’s “The Path Not Taken” from English into Swedish than from English into Bedouin Arabic. (Apart from different philosophies of free will, the concept of path is also different in the desert.)

An example of cross-linguistic dissonance is in order. There are two words in English—“stranger” and “guest”—that refer to visitors to a community from outside. In English-speaking cultures, it is common sense—something obvious and unquestioned—that distinguishes the concepts as separate categories. Not all strangers are guests, and not all guests are strangers. A person must receive an invitation to cross the border between being a stranger and becoming a guest entitled to hospitality. This voluntary act bestows a change of status. Strangers are not usually welcomed into people’s homes, and so the notions of “stranger” and “guest” are clearly differentiated.

This is not the case in Greek, where *xénos* means “stranger” and “guest” simultaneously. Greek common sense does not demarcate the concepts denoted by the words. Reflecting on life in rural Crete, Martin Hammond believes that strangers have always been guests: “They were rare enough and a stranger/

guest was a cause for pride, for eager, elaborate and, I fear, expensive hospitality, and for polite but incessant questioning. As in the ancient world, a guest brings both honour and information.”⁶

Just as a society’s conception of insider–outsider relations and the obligations of hospitality are faithfully reflected in language, so is its understanding of conflict and conflict resolution. From this observation, it follows that close attention to language can provide a convenient entry into the study of culturally grounded differences. Building on this premise, Michael Agar and John Paul Lederach propose two complementary strategies of semantic analysis.

Rich Points and Key Words

For Michael Agar, gaps in the understanding of conflict inevitably “surface in the language people use to interact with each other.” He suggests that major cross-cultural gaps are revealed at certain “rich points” of contrasting meaning. The *xénos*–stranger/guest gap would be one such rich point. Agar gives another example of a Mexican attorney who uses the same verb for dealing with a government official as is used when a matador works the bull in a bullfight. Does the attorney mean that he is goading the official or wearing him down before the kill? Or is he referring to a stylized contest with its own ritual and aesthetic? Without speaking Spanish or being familiar with the culture of the bullfight, it is hard for the native English speaker to get beyond a general and superficial impression of what is implied.

Rich points are significant “because of the intricate web of associations and connotations that they carry with them, webs that have few or only opaque corresponding echoes in one’s native language, so that no easy translation is possible. Rich points are the linguistic tip of the cultural iceberg, the locations in discourse which signal major disjunctions in interpretation.”⁷ Rich points can seriously impede intercultural negotiation and conflict resolution.

How can we locate and identify rich points? The method suggested here is the juxtaposition of key words across languages. A key word may be a word that encapsulates central features of a culture or, in the case of conflict resolution, refers to an important concept (like “conflict” or “compromise”). Raymond Williams first adopted the method of studying contemporary English culture through key words.⁸ Recently, Anna Wierzbicka has gone a step further

⁶ Martin Hammond, “Walking through the Odyssey,” *The Spectator* (London), March 15, 2000, p. 15.

⁷ Michael Agar, “Linguistic Peace Work,” *Peace and Change* 21, No. 4 (1996), pp. 430–433. See also Michael Agar, *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976).

by comparing key words across cultures.⁹ The present exercise applies this method to vocabularies of conflict resolution.

Themes and Metaphors

Agar sees rich points as linked together and given coherence by underpinning themes. John Paul Lederach developed this argument in reflections on the articulation of conflict in Costa Rican Spanish. He noticed that neighbors discussing a problem in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, used “an entire repertoire of terms and phrases describing the many faces of conflict” but tended to avoid the word for conflict itself. Conflict, they told him, was what happened in Nicaragua (where a civil war was raging), not here. In Costa Rica, they had “*pleitos, lios, and enredos* (fights, messes, and entanglements).” When Lederach collated and analyzed this extensive and colorful vocabulary, he realized that words and metaphors provided “enormous insight into how people think about, respond to, and experience conflict in their everyday setting.” He found that “key metaphors revolved around heat, feeling trapped or lost with no way out, and understanding conflict as embedded in a network of people.” The word *enredo* was particularly indicative because it stems from the word for a fisherman’s net (*red*) and evokes the tangle of complications that results when disagreements spread throughout a tightly knit society of close communities and extended families. Lederach’s conclusion, which I thoroughly endorse, is that “language is always more than a vehicle for communication. It is also a window into how people organize both their understanding and expression of conflict, often in keeping with cultural patterns and ways of operating.”¹⁰

THE ENGLISH VERSION

Since English is now widely used as a global lingua franca, the preferred language of international organizations, science, and the Internet, many English speakers tend to assume that it is free of idiosyncrasy and cultural bias. It may even be thought of as a metalanguage beyond culture, depicting the world in a completely objective way, like a system of mathematical notation. When the global language is also the tongue of a culturally omnipresent, ideologically evangelical power, that view gains added credence.

English is a highly effective medium of exchange when used as a common technical language by engineers, bankers, soldiers, lawyers, and diplomats. As

⁹ Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pp. 74–78.

long as experts, who draw on an accepted vocabulary of defined terms, use a language in a precise, “thin” sense, scope for cross-cultural misunderstanding is limited. When aviation specialists and lawyers negotiate an air traffic agreement under the Bermuda Convention, linguistic and cultural (but not necessarily political or substantive) gaps are unlikely to have much salience. But these are restrictive conditions that hold because experts “speak a common language” and are members of a professional culture. The less these circumstances apply, the less self-evident the case for the universal validity of English. Problems arise with the assumption of consonance across cultures when interlocutors are not fellow experts working in their own discipline, when the issues at stake are emotive, abstract, and value-laden, and when there is no methodological consensus.

We shall begin this comparative analysis by considering the vocabulary that English uses to portray (and therefore think and talk about) conflict resolution. This consideration can help explain the unstated, underlying premises. It also provides us with a basis of comparison, a benchmark against which we can measure the peculiarities of other discourses. English displays four dominant (albeit overlapping) themes and metaphors—industrial relations, engineering, Christian theology, and sports and games.¹¹

Industrial Relations

A characteristic feature of the English vocabulary of conflict resolution is the prominence of terms linked to settling labor-management disputes. Since the English-speaking world is made up of established industrial societies, boasting a long history of legislation to establish rules and mechanisms of labor conciliation, this should come as no surprise. “Dispute” itself is a disagreement or quarrel that touches on important issues, such as people’s livelihoods, but does not on the whole possess the connotation of belligerence attached to “conflict.” A work dispute may involve heated debate, high stakes, and tense confrontation, but the assumption is that the opponents will pursue their differences of opinion through nonviolent methods of persuasion. The suggestion is that the issues are not zero sum, that compromise is possible and desirable because the disputants have shared interests, and that resolution will be achieved ultimately through some form of institutional or legal recourse, such as arbitration or mediation.

“Conflict” can overlap with “dispute” and is used loosely of a general clash of interests or views. Yet it often retains a flavor of its original violent sense of “an encounter with arms; a fight, battle.” For these reasons, many writers prefer

¹¹ In the following account, I refer extensively to the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1993).

the word “dispute” to “conflict” for a domestic altercation. ADR is now a technical expression referring to nonconfrontational techniques of conciliation. Note that the distinction between a structured, more manageable “dispute” and a deep-seated, possibly violent and unpredictable “conflict” is not made in Hebrew and Arabic, which have one umbrella term to cover both meanings (*sichsuch* and *niza'*). It is my contention—and presumably that of ADR practitioners—that this semantic distinction fosters a discriminating way of thinking about a concept. If you talk about a quarrel as a “dispute,” then you are likely to consider it more malleable than if you dub it a “conflict.”

Other key words generally used in a conflict resolution context are also connected to industrial relations. “Conciliation,” the act of bringing contrary outlooks into harmony, was the term chosen in Britain and the Antipodes in the nineteenth century for the peaceful, legal procedures used in the resolution of industrial problems. Such procedures resulted in the 1867 British Councils of Conciliation Act, the 1894 New Zealand Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, and the establishment of conciliation boards to deal with industrial problems. “Arbitration” and “mediation” acquired industrial connotations in the twentieth century, especially in the United States. Today, both procedures play a central role in the settlement of labor-management grievances, and a sophisticated system of legislation and regulatory agencies is in place. “Settlement,” the term often applied to the compromise resulting from successful industrial conciliation, has a whole range of established legal meanings. In the context of dispute resolution, it implies an arrangement putting formerly contentious affairs on a secure, stable footing and reflects the institutionalization of this form of conflict resolution.

By drawing on an industrial relations vocabulary, we introduce assumptions about the nature of conflict resolution into the debate. Labor-management disputes were not always settled so efficaciously and peacefully as they are today (and in many parts of the world they are still the occasion for violence and brutal repression). That they are is a result of long socialization and the purposeful construction of intricate regulatory machinery. Within such a framework, disputants can be confident that their needs will be fairly and effectively addressed, that the weak will not simply go to the wall, and that the outcome, resulting from mutual and balanced concessions, will be a reasonable compromise.

“Compromise” is the pivotal concept here and refers to the adjustment of differences involving balanced concessions. In English usage, a willingness to compromise is usually seen as laudable, and the term is even reified (“what we need is a spirit of compromise”). Lacking a precise equivalent, in recent years Arabic has adopted *hal wasat* (middle solution) to approximate compromise. But *hal wasat* lacks the ethic of compromise. With *hal wasat*, the reverse applies: a compromise over principle (such as Honor, Justice, Truth, the Land) is to be deplored, not explored.

Many distinguished American diplomats, including Arthur Goldberg, Sol Linowitz, George Shultz, Cyrus Vance, and Warren Christopher cut their teeth working on labor-management relations. Industrial conciliation provided a training ground for skills and habits of mind later applied to international relations. Key ideas in the theoretical literature came out of the same experience. One example is the seminal distinction drawn between “distributive” bargaining, in which one side’s gain is the other side’s loss, and mutually advantageous (“win-win”) “integrative” bargaining.¹²

Engineering

The enormous success of industrial conciliation, with its elaborate apparatus of laws and agencies, gave rise to the hope that similarly rational instruments could be developed and applied elsewhere with equally beneficial results. Imbued with a spirit of “can do,” this approach seeks to apply to conflict study the techniques of systematic data collection and analysis used in other areas of the behavioral sciences. Lessons learned are to be applied in training professional facilitators. Outside the English-speaking world are skeptical voices. George Irani questions the philosophy that “virtually every conflict can be managed and resolved” and notes a Lebanese suspicion “of the theory and techniques of Western conflict resolution.” He believes that people in the Middle East see it “as a scheme concocted by the United States to facilitate and hasten” Israel’s integration in the region.¹³

At the linguistic level, the effort to professionalize dispute resolution is found in the adoption of a low-key, technical vocabulary, which owes everything to science and engineering and nothing to the loaded and fatalistic metaphors of entangling communal ties observed by Lederach in Costa Rica. Particular attention should be paid to the words “problem,” “process,” and “solution,” not originally conflict resolution terms as such, but widely adopted in this context.

“Problem” is the term often applied in English, with deliberate understatement, to a grave domestic dispute or international conflict. By preferring this to another, more graphic word, the quarrel is placed in a common basket, together with other puzzles that are susceptible to the dispassionate exercise of reason. This is not a self-evident classification. Other metaphors of tragedy and struggle are available. From another cultural perspective colorful description might be chosen more readily than understatement. The implication of “problem” is that the conflict is amenable to rational analysis, that it can be handled objec-

¹²Richard E. Walton and Robert B. McKersie, *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations: An Analysis of a Social Interaction System* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

¹³George Irani, “Islamic Mediation Techniques for Middle East Conflicts,” *MERIA Journal* 3, No. 2 (1999), p. 1.

tively, and that a solution is possible. “Solution” is an emphatically mathematical-scientific term.

“Process,” too, is a word that elicits math and engineering or a patterned series of events that can be understood and controlled. With its hint of continuity and progress, “peace process” is an upbeat label to affix to the many frustrating attempts to disentangle the webs of hatred in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. “Process” captures decades of the perseverance of British and American conciliators in the face of discouraging setbacks. *’Amaliyat al-Salam*, the Arabic term, is connected with notions of work and action. But it lacks the same optimistic connotations of steady progress or continuing effort, even if no end is in sight. *’Amaliya* implies a product, not just movement.

Christian Theology

Religious imagery is a common feature of the conflict resolution discourse. This may be because religion, which underpins traditional culture, centrally concerns itself with the ethics of human strife and harmony. But radically different theological perspectives on strife, peace, suffering, and justice spawn a striking diversity of values and notions across languages.

“Reconciliation” is one of the key conflict resolution words in the English lexicon, in terms of frequency of use and salience as an objective. In its primary contemporary sense, it means restoring a relationship after estrangement or bringing a dispute to an end through amicable agreement. It assumes an inner change of heart and mind. “Reconciliation” also possesses ancient and hallowed Christian associations. One set of meanings is related to the readmission of a sinner, an excommunicant, into union with the Church. Other meanings refer to acts of expiation, atonement, purification, and absolution. Underpinning all these senses is the core belief that people should live in peace and harmony with God and with one another. This core belief lends the derivative notion of reconciliation between men and women transcendent worth and urgency. Hence great emphasis is placed on the rehabilitation of human relations.

Without reconciliation, it is taken for granted in English-speaking cultures that any practical set of arrangements is unlikely to last. In addition, reconciliation, like forgiveness between enemies, is viewed as an end in itself, an ethical imperative. Nor are these merely empty expressions, but signposts to action. If you believe that people are put on earth to live in harmony and love one another, then this has far-reaching operative consequences for the way you conceive of and handle conflict. Christian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have invested much time and money into grassroots programs intended to bring about reconciliation—a change of heart and mind between rival groups like Israelis and Palestinians.

Other key conflict resolution terms with a religious flavor are “goodwill” and “good faith.” These terms are to be distinguished from simple “trust.” Min-

imal trust is necessary in resolving a dispute because without it reliable communication is impossible and no party will conclude an agreement that it believes will be violated later. The synonyms mentioned above contain additional value-laden associations. As a condition of progress, “goodwill” implies a virtuous predisposition to benevolence and goes beyond plain reliability. It is found in the New Testament injunction, “and on earth peace, good will toward men.”¹⁴ Analogously, “good faith” implies a sincere commitment to resolve conflict and an honest intention to carry out any agreement reached. It recalls religious terms such as “the Faith,” “come all ye faithful,” “men of faith,” and “O ye of little faith.” Good faith in the resolution of conflict derives from an ethical obligation to spread peace and not just from expediency.

Sports and Games

A striking feature of the English-language discourse of negotiation and conflict resolution is the employment of sports and games similes. Some examples are “level playing field,” “play by the rules,” “fair play,” “way out in left field,” “close call,” “in the home stretch,” “run with the ball,” and “hit a home run.” Some of these terms are incomprehensible to a nonnative speaker of English who is unfamiliar with the sports and games popular in the English-speaking world, such as baseball, soccer, American football, tennis, golf, racing, rugby, cricket, and poker.

Reference to sports originates from a love of games and the open air and a long history of vigorous public recreation among the English-speaking peoples. Organized team games were introduced into British and American schools in the nineteenth century to channel high spirits in harmless directions and to promote physical fitness. They were also consciously promoted as a way of teaching such cherished martial values as team spirit, discipline, and leadership, and were an excellent means of instilling good citizenship and fair play, an ethic of gallant conduct toward an opponent going beyond the strict rules.

Using sports vocabulary reflects a profound Anglo-Saxon tendency to perceive and configure all kinds of contests, whether in the social or political arenas, as structured activities, governed by fairness and decency, and conducted within a framework of enforceable laws or rules of the game. Sports are strenuous physical struggle, a surrogate for conflict, fought by clear rules for an artificial goal. Since sports are stylized, sublimated conflict played from an early age, it is not surprising that adults should later view real conflict in the same terms of orderly engagement. If there is a single characteristic feature of conflict and its resolution in the English-speaking world, it is the tendency to relate to it as a rule-regulated activity that is governed by the values of equity and fair play.

¹⁴ Luke 2:14.

THE ARABIC VERSION

Arabic is spoken by about 200 million people and is an official language of the United Nations. As the language of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an, and therefore the lingua franca of Islamic civilization, Arabic has been used for many centuries, not only as the mother tongue of the Arabs, but also as a rich and evocative language of theology, philosophy, science, literature, diplomacy, and trade. It has also had a profound influence on many other languages, including Farsi, Malay, Swahili, Turkish, and Urdu. Precise Arabic equivalents are available for all technical diplomatic terms.¹⁵ Since the arrival of Napoleon in Egypt in 1798, the Arab world has been in close contact with the West, and the Arabs are no strangers to European ways. Western law and institutions have had a formative impact. Nevertheless, conflict resolution in the Arab world has a distinctive character all its own. The Arabic terminology of conflict resolution lacks the four major themes that dominate English-language discourse.¹⁶ Instead, it reflects two primary motifs: Honor and Islamic ethics.

Honor

Arabic language and culture recall even today the traditional, tribal way of life that typified the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam in the seventh century. Arabic still evokes a world of martial skills and virtues; a harsh, nomadic existence among domestic animals; and a society of closely knit families organized into clans on the basis of segmental lineage. Since clan members have little chance of surviving on their own, primary values relate to the welfare of the group and the individual's place and duties within it. Key concepts include *sharaf* (standing, honor), *'ird* (dignity, honor), and *wajh* (face, reputation).

In this segmented, honor-based society, clan rivalry is endemic. Conflict may ignite over matters of honor, which can be anything concerning women, land, property, and one's good name or that of one's family.¹⁷ Equally, a dispute may start out as an argument over something trivial and quickly escalate into an affair of honor. Conflict risks igniting blood revenge or retribution (*tha'r*), a cycle of murderous feuding between clans that might smolder for years. Note

¹⁵ See Mamum Al-Hamui, *Diplomatic Terms* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966).

¹⁶ I have drawn upon J.M. Cowan, ed., *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, 4th ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994).

¹⁷ Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code recognizes honor as an extenuating circumstance in murder cases. Official Jordanian figures show that there are on average twenty-five "honor killings" a year, involving the murder by family members of female relatives believed to have committed adultery. Christian Arabs as well as Muslims are involved in the practice (*BBC News*, April 24, 2000).

that the common Arabic word for “conflict” (*niza’*) covers the semantic fields of both the English terms “dispute” and “conflict.” *Niza’* may be merely a verbal quarrel and need not be violent. But it has the potential to become so.

Traditional conflict resolution drew on tribal custom and involved informal or formal modes of mediation and arbitration (*wasata* and *tahkim*). Until the modern era, there was no state and no secular law. Local ties and patterns of influence were paramount, and conciliators paid particular attention to saving face. Face saving in this system is essential because if there is to be a workable solution, neither party must be shamed.

Islamic Ethics

The prominence of Islamic principles of conciliation is the second distinctive feature of Arabic conflict resolution. These concepts are built into Arabic, just as those of Christianity are ingrained in the fabric of English. To the native speaker, they constitute self-evident truths and tautologies. The major concepts referred to below are *tahkim* (formal arbitration), *musalahah* (act of reconciliation) and the related word *sulh* (peaceful settlement, reconciliation), and *’afw* (pardon, forgiveness). Although rooted in pre-Islamic tradition, they acquired strong religious significance when the Prophet Muhammad introduced them into Islam.

Underpinning Islamic law and conflict resolution is the cardinal principle of *’adl*. Connected with the idea of balance, *’adl* has a rich range of meanings including “justice,” “equity,” “impartiality,” “fairness,” and “honesty.” Another key word is *haqq*, which means both “truth” and “law,” evoking notions of correctness and rightness. The plural form, *huquq*, means “rights.” Truth and rights are seen as two sides of the same coin. *Haqq*, significantly, is one of the names of God, therefore a divine attribute. *’Adl* and *haqq* are supreme values for Muslims—categorical imperatives, epitomizing all that is virtuous. They figure prominently in Arabic discourse and have decisively shaped Arab expectations in Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

A dual system of religious and civil courts exists in the Arab world. In addition, there are traditional forms of conciliation at the communal level. Resort to these mechanisms varies according to place and circumstances. The disintegration of state institutions caused by the Lebanese civil war left a vacuum to be filled by the religious courts and alternative methods of conflict resolution. Similarly, in Palestinian territories occupied by Israel, mistrust for the Israeli court system boosted resort to local variants of arbitration.¹⁸ But even in states with robust legal systems, customary approaches to conflict resolution may be

¹⁸Ifrah Zilberman, “Customary Law as a Social System in the Jerusalem Area” (Hebrew), *The New East* 33 (1991); Ali H. Qleibo, “Tribal Methods of Conflict Resolution—The Palestinian Model: *Atwash* or *Sulh Asha’iry*,” in Jay Rothman, ed.,

preferred. Traditional values remain compelling. Many urban dwellers are only a generation or two away from the moral fellowship of the rural community. Finally, the old ways of accommodating differences are often more effective in restoring communal harmony than is resorting to adjudication, an expensive system not necessarily accessible to ordinary folk.

The alternatives to the courts are *tahkim*, formal arbitration, and *wasata*, an informal mediation–arbitration hybrid. As a procedure, *tahkim* is only slightly less formal and judicial in tone than adjudication by the courts. To judge and to arbitrate stem from the same root, and *hukm* is both a legal judgment and an arbitral decision. Ahmad Al-Shahi describes *tahkim* as a “bureaucratic legal institution associated with the modern state” and contrasts it with *wasata*, conciliation within the local community.¹⁹ Nizar Hamzeh characterizes *tahkim* as involving the binding decision of an arbitrator or panel of arbitrators drawing on legal principles. There is an academic disagreement between two Islamic schools of thought whether the arbitral award is morally or legally binding. Yet there is no dispute that the decision is effectively obligatory.²⁰

Tahkim has two significant features: unlike in litigation, the disputants have some say in the selection of the arbitrators. More important, the role of the arbitrators is not simply to make a judicial ruling but to try to reconcile the antagonists. In a case of marital arbitration, failure will lead to the divorce court.²¹ *Tahkim* is a procedure long recognized by Islam. Ahmad Moussalli points out that it is frequently referred to in the Qur'an and was “adopted into the Islamic legal system as a key element in settling disputes and litigation.” The Prophet Muhammad himself acted as an arbitrator. Arbitrators were traditionally wise men of flawless merit, and their “judgments were treated as moral and philosophical discourses on life and society . . . seen not only as of a contractual nature but also of a moral nature.”²²

Besides *tahkim*, disputants have available to them *wasata*, where local customs play a central part. *Wasata* draws on the good offices of one or more notables acceptable to the disputants. *Wasit* (mediator) is derived from *awsat*, which literally means “middle.” But the usual translation of *wasata* as “medi-

Practicing Conflict Resolution in Divided Societies (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute, 1993).

¹⁹ Interview, April 14, 2000.

²⁰ A. Nizar Hamzeh, “The Role of Hizbullah in Conflict Management within Lebanon’s Shia Community,” in Salem, ed., *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World*, pp. 105–107. See also Muhammad Faour, “Conflict Management within the Muslim Arab Family: Observations and Three Case Studies,” in *ibid.*, p. 183.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ahmad S. Moussalli, “An Islamic Model for Political Conflict Resolution: *Tahkim* (Arbitration),” in Salem, ed., *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World*, pp. 47–48, 50–58.

ation” in the Western sense is misleading because, in the end, the mediators propose a settlement that the parties may not like at first. Like a *hakam* (arbitrator), a *wasit* is expected to come up with a judgment, not facilitate a negotiation. As George Irani explains, “The mediator is perceived as someone having all the answers and solutions.”²³ Nizar Hamzeh sees the *hakam* and *wasit* as broadly similar but notes that in *wasata* “the disputants have some indirect communication.”²⁴

To perform the role of an intermediary, a *wasit* should be reliable and fair, pure of heart, and with good intentions. Traditionally, a *wasit* is a venerable, utterly respectable local dignitary whose integrity is impeccable and whose verdict will therefore be beyond challenge. In the northern part of the Sudan, it is said that the disputants have to respect the intermediary’s words (i.e., decision) as final and “not throw them on the ground.” In Hizbullah circles, the verdict is described as morally but not legally binding. Personal wealth may be an asset to a mediator, and in Bedouin society, a *wasit* may have to reach into his own pocket to sweeten or facilitate the deal in a practical sense. A mediator is usually male, but a woman can act as intermediary if at least one of the parties is female.²⁵

Wasata proceeds with the disputants separately invited to give the mediators their version of the facts and rehearse their grievances. They may be questioned in detail. The parties may come before the mediators, or a mediator may visit the parties in their own homes. Having heard them out, the mediators then come up with their decision—reflecting their considered opinion of the rights and wrongs of the case, the good of the community, and what will put an end to the underlying causes of the dispute. Unlike adjudication or formal arbitration, this is not a court procedure, and witnesses or the police are not called in. The process may go on for several days, as mediators go back and forth between the parties to cajole and persuade them to accept a settlement. During the course of the mediation, tempers may run high, proposals may be rejected in disgust, and threats may be made by the parties to break off the mediation. There is doubtless some posturing by the disputants as they attempt to influence the final judgment in their own favor.

As Ahmad Al-Shahi noted from his personal experience of conflict resolution in the northern part of the Sudan, the protracted nature of the process was deliberately intended to wear down the objections of the disputants and even physically wear them out. He also observed that the presence of mediators was critical because they provided the disputants with the social incentive to accept

²³ Irani, “Islamic Mediation Techniques,” p. 5.

²⁴ Hamzeh, “The Role Of Hizbullah,” p. 108.

²⁵ Faour, “Conflict Management,” p. 186.

the verdict to avoid shaming the mediators.²⁶ In his description of *wasata* in Jordan, Richard Antoun emphasized its public and social dimension by observing that the stage for the action was largely the village guesthouse.²⁷ In addition to marshalling substantive arguments about the issues in dispute, mediators make considerable play with their own honor and standing, personal ties to the parties, and the wider kinship and social implications of the quarrel. Considerable moral pressure to settle is placed on the protagonists.

The resolution of a conflict is *hasmi niza'* (literally, the termination of conflict). *Hasm* means the “decisive end” of something and is connected with *hasama*, “to cut,” and *husam*, a classical word for “sword.” Ending a dispute involves a practical arrangement effectively addressing the issues under contention. But symbolic expedients are equally important to arrive at *sulh*, a settlement and reconciliation between enemies. In the case of murder, the arbitral judgment might call for the murderer to be sent into exile and compensation paid to the victim’s family. The main objective is to prevent the outbreak of a blood feud.²⁸

There may also be a request for pardon or forgiveness, *'afw*. This is an important concept found in the Qur'an, with connotations of divine forgiveness of sin. It catches the combination of honor and ethics at the heart of Arab conflict resolution. An apology might not seem to add up to much, but in an honor-based society, it entails a difficult public admission of guilt for wrongdoing. Begging pardon has a ritual, formal dimension, and the guilty party may not believe in his heart that he is to blame. Nevertheless, the utterance itself declares responsibility and exonerates one of the parties, so it is an excellent means of severing the sequence of reprisal and counterreprisal. The appropriate response to the plea for pardon from the injured party, now in a position of moral superiority, is a magnanimous grant of forgiveness.²⁹

In tribal society the culminating symbolic act of reconciliation, *musalahah*, takes place at the *sulh* or *sulha* ceremony of peacemaking (all words are from the same root meaning “good,” “right,” and “proper”). The two families or clans meet to implement the arbitral judgment and seal the compact with gestures of reconciliation, embracing, eating, and drinking round the communal table. Thus social relations resume and communal harmony is restored.³⁰ Whether

²⁶ Interview, April 14, 2000.

²⁷ Richard Antoun, “Institutionalized Deconfrontation: A Case Study of Conflict Resolution among Tribal Peasants in Jordan,” in Salem, eds., *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World*, pp. 140–174.

²⁸ Hamzeh, “The Role Of Hizbullah,” pp. 110–113.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 114; Ahmad Al-Shahi interview.

³⁰ Antoun, “Institutionalized Deconfrontation,” pp. 144, 163.

all inner resentment and antagonism are removed is beside the point. Richard Antoun sees the value of peacemaking as “fictive (the public demonstration that hard feelings have disappeared), pragmatic (allowing resumption of normal social relations), and educational (as the villagers put it, ‘our guesthouse councils are our schools’); and not psychological or ethical.”³¹

THE HEBREW VERSION

Unlike English and Arabic, Hebrew is a minor national tongue spoken by only about five or six million people. Israelis mostly conduct international exchanges in English. Nevertheless, the Hebrew discourse of conflict resolution decisively informs Israeli thinking on the subject. Unless they speak English at the native speaker level, most Israelis at best “speak English and think Hebrew.” Moreover, apart from face-to-face exchanges with their foreign interlocutors, Israelis conduct internal business in their own tongue. All papers, instructions, memos, consultations, speeches, briefings, reports, and correspondence directed by Israelis to Israelis are in Hebrew. Even if the external language is English, the internal language is Hebrew.

How does the Hebrew vocabulary of conflict resolution differ from that of English? Hebrew discourse is not significantly typified by the themes seen to characterize English. A few sports similes can be translated accurately from the English, like the expression, “the ball is in his court.” But in most cases, a literal translation does not make sense. Israelis do not think of conflict resolution in sports terms because sports do not play the same role in Israeli culture as in Anglo-Saxon culture. Sports are not a primary instrument of education and socialization; youth movements and military service perform these roles. Hebrew borrows the word “fair” in limited contexts, such as children’s games, but fair play is not a viable cultural concept.

Military rather than sports metaphors are rife in Israeli negotiating discourse. The word for negotiating position, *emda*, is the same as that for a fortified outpost or “stand,” as in “Custer’s last stand.” *Bitachon*, meaning both “security” and “certainty,” is a supreme national shibboleth, presumably as a result of past persecution and continuous vulnerability. “Minister of defense” translates into Hebrew as “minister of *bitachon*” (security). The goal of negotiations is always peace and security.

The vocabulary of industrial conciliation is sparse in Hebrew because labor-management disputes have always been dealt with directly by the government and the Histadrut trade union federation. Religious concepts such as “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” certainly exist in Hebrew, but bear connotations that depart significantly from the Christian ethic of forgiving an enemy. Historical

³¹ Ibid., p. 163.

enemies of the Jewish people are anathematized as eternal foes. Conversely, Jewish culture tends to reduce all kinds of disputes, disagreements, and conflicts to verbal debate and to view argument as inherently desirable, an ethic in itself.³² Yet there are important shared Judeo-Christian values, such as a preference for persuasion over violence, the peace ethic, and the profound assumptions that concession and compromise are at the heart of any settlement of differences.

In recent years, ADR has been introduced into Israel from the United States.³³ Two words have been invented by the Academy for the Hebrew Language to provide a minimal ADR vocabulary: *pishur*, meaning “conciliation” in general (related to *pshara*, compromise or arbitral award), and *gishur* for “mediation” in the conciliatory sense used by ADR specialists. The Israeli courts now suggest *gishur* in many cases as an option for litigants. There is therefore growing interest in these concepts, but Israelis still tend to resort to litigation or formal arbitration to resolve domestic disputes.

For “solution,” Hebrew has the Biblical word *pitaron*. In Biblical Hebrew, *pitaron* means the interpretation of a dream, as in the story of Joseph at Pharaoh’s court. This flavor of deciphering an arcane text is retained in other meanings of the word, including the idea of *pitaron* as the “resolution” of a conflict—the right answer to a knotty issue under dispute. *Pitaron* implies that the answer is there if only those involved are wise enough to come up with a satisfactory formula. It also reflects a strong belief in the efficacy of reasoned discussion. Significantly, *pitaron* is closely linked etymologically with *pshara*. There is a deep-seated assumption that the satisfactory solution to a dispute or political conundrum will usually entail a compromise.

Over the many years of U.S. and U.N. efforts to mediate in the Arab-Israeli conflict, “mediator” was always rendered by *metavech*, literally “agent” or “broker.” Most commonly, *metavech* refers to the intermediary in a commercial transaction, such as a house sale. For this service the agent receives a fee. Thus mediation is thought of as a way of doing business and not of resolving conflict. Significantly, Israel, in marked contrast to the Arabs, has rarely been enthusiastic about active diplomatic mediation. Moreover, since mediators have a material stake in ensuring the success of a negotiation, it is assumed that they are acting out of self-interest, not benevolence.

The Hebrew discourse of conflict resolution is dominated by legal terminology, much of which goes back to the Talmud, the great compendium of Jewish law, ethics, and custom redacted from the second to fifth centuries CE.

³² Jacob Neusner, “Ethnic Trait or Religious Value: Why We Jews Enjoy a Good Argument,” *Judaism* 46, No. 1 (1997).

³³ See David Matz, “ADR and Life in Israel,” *Negotiation Journal* 7, No. 1 (1991), pp. 11–16.

It was the basis for rabbinical rulings on all aspects of family and communal existence in the diaspora. Since emphasis in the Talmud is placed on debates, disputes, and arguments, the vocabulary of conflict makes a comprehensive appearance. The common theme running through the entire literature is that disputes are understood as, or reducible to, differences of textual interpretation that can be reconciled with ingenuity. Disagreement is viewed as natural since the truth emerges out of the exchange of opinions between disputants.

There are several words for “argument”; for example, *pilpul* refers to a typical form of dialectical reasoning engaged in by Talmudists who debated the meaning of a text and related commentaries. Today the term refers to an exhaustive style of legal argumentation, placing special emphasis on interpretations and definitions. *Vikuach* covers a broad semantic field, including “argument,” “discussion,” “disputation,” “controversy,” “polemic,” and “debate.” These uses are linked by the common idea that interlocutors attempt through logical means to persuade each other of the correctness of a certain point of view. “Argue” and “prove” are closely related in Hebrew since they derive from the same root. We may conclude that while English draws fine distinctions between different shades of argument, Hebrew collates all forms of reasoned persuasion into one category.

Another significant term is *machloket*, a serious “difference of opinion.” Yet the term clearly implies that the problem is surmountable, and it would be unusual for a *machloket* to be resolved by other than peaceful means. Between Talmudic sages, a “*machloket* for the sake of heaven” was a scholarly disputation about a point of law. Such (essentially textual) debates were not considered lamentable or schismatic but viewed as the essence of learning. A readiness for ardent debate on serious issues remains a striking feature of Jewish culture to this day.

The common umbrella term for “conflict” is *sichsuch*, but it covers a wider semantic field than the English word does. Its range of meanings encompasses international conflicts like the Arab–Israeli dispute, feuds between communities, labor disputes, family or neighborhood quarrels, even falling out with a friend. Thus *sichsuch* can entail the disruption of a relationship or involve a violent, protracted state of hostility. Since *sichsuch* can refer to major and minor antagonisms alike, the word has less fateful connotations than “conflict.” A *sichsuch* is part of the natural order of things, but there is the implication that the same methods of reasoned persuasion used for tackling a minor quarrel are equally appropriate for settling a major case of strife.

Like the United States, Israel is a disputatious society and many quarrels end up in litigation. The traditional alternative to litigation, going back to the Talmudic period, is arbitration, *borerut*. In fact, many cases in Israel today that come before a judge end up being settled on the basis of an arbitral instead of a judicial decision. Arbitration in Israel is a formal, structured procedure regulated by a 1968 law. Provided that the parties sign a binding undertaking to accept any decision, the judge listens to the claims of both sides and drafts a

settlement based on equity rather than the strict letter of the law. The judge or arbitrator is supposed to meet the parties separately, but informally, a judge may bring the disputants together in his chambers late in the proceedings, in an attempt to secure their voluntary compliance with a compromise. Thus *borerut* is not just a judgment but also may include a trace of supervised negotiation at the final stage. Among secular Jews, the arbitrator is almost always a judge, but among Orthodox Jews, a respected rabbi acceptable to both parties will be chosen. Mediation is hardly resorted to other than in business and the fledgling ADR movement.

Hebrew has various revealing words for the outcome of conflict resolution. “To resolve a conflict” is *leyashev sichsuch*, where *leyashev*, just as in English, literally means settle or arrange. *Leyashev* can also mean reconciling contradictory textual interpretations or legal principles, further emphasizing the textual motif in the Hebrew discourse of conflict resolution. An arbitral award is *pshara*, which is also the term for “compromise.” It is therefore built into the very concept of a settlement that it will necessarily entail compromise.

It is hard to translate “reconciliation,” the restoration of harmonious relations, into Hebrew. *Tshuva* literally means “a return to God following repentance” and is never used to describe relations between people. One possible candidate for human reconciliation is simply *shalom*, meaning “peace,” “harmony,” “tranquillity,” and “greetings,” but also evoking the ideas of safety and completeness. Reconciliation of a married couple would be translated as *shlom bayit* (domestic peace) from the associative form of *shalom*. When two former rivals make up after a dispute this can be translated as *hashlama*, “making whole,” also associated with *shalom*.

Shalom is a polysemic word in Hebrew with multiple meanings. At a mundane level, it is used much more frequently than “peace” since it crops up in most conversations as a greeting or inquiry after a person’s well-being. In addition to the idea of domestic and international harmony and welfare, in international relations, *shalom* combines two seeming opposites—security and a peace of the prophets. Thus *shalom* turns up in the language of the military communiqué: “F-16 jets carried out raids on Hizbullah targets in Southern Lebanon this afternoon. All planes returned in *shalom* to base.” “In *shalom*” here means “safely,” not “in peace.” At a more elevated level, *shalom* also commonly conveys the ideal associations of a messianic age found in the Biblical books of Isaiah and Amos.

Another word sometimes used for reconciliation is *piyus*, implying a dissipation of anger and tension by placating an aggrieved adversary. *Piyus*, like other conflict resolution words, is found in the Talmud, where it contains the notion of comfort, consolation, or apology. But *piyus* is much less frequently used in Hebrew than “reconciliation” is in English. It is also one-sided and may possess connotations of appeasement, a futile and dishonorable attempt to buy off an aggressor. *Hitpysut* is reciprocal but rarely used. In the final analysis, we

would not usually choose any of the words mentioned above in everyday speech, preferring instead the ubiquitous term *pshara* for compromise, settlement of a dispute. It is taken for granted that life can then return to normal, a state of affairs that has in fact no special label.

CONCLUSION: AN EXAMPLE

Enough has been written here to demonstrate the general point that different languages—with their various religious, historical, and cultural backgrounds—configure conflict resolution in diverse ways. The English-language discourse of conflict resolution is not a universally applicable metaparadigm that transcends culture. If Arabic were the global language, diplomats would speak and think about conflict and conflict resolution differently. Conciliation would follow the methods of the Arab League rather than those of the Atlantic Alliance or European Union.

As long as conflict resolution remains confined within a given tradition, anomalies and contradictions across languages can be safely overlooked. They become relevant only when conflict resolution is attempted across paradigms, which is increasingly the case in multicultural societies and contemporary international affairs. Syrian-Israeli relations in the Hafiz al-Assad period were an outstanding case of the confrontation of inconsistent versions. Following the Madrid Conference in 1991, both sides committed themselves irrevocably to making peace. Yet negotiations through the good offices of the United States dragged on for a decade.

A fundamental problem was the confrontation of principled as opposed to pragmatic ethics of conflict resolution. In almost every statement or broadcast on the peace negotiations, Syrians reiterate their attachment to principles. In the words of Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas: “We have firm principles. We do not forfeit any of our rights. . . . The peace decision is a strategic decision. Yet this does not mean a concession of basic principles.”³⁴ Principles, *mabadi* in Arabic (from *bad'*, meaning “beginning” or “start”), are the necessary starting point, basis, or foundation of Syria’s position in the negotiations. As defined by Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shar’, they can be summarized as “The land, dignity, and our rights.”³⁵ These are irreducible categorical imperatives and not rhetorical slogans as Israelis perceive them. “Syria would not compromise its honor by relinquishing even one inch of its land.”³⁶

³⁴ BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB)*, August 3, 1995.

³⁵ *Foreign Broadcast Information Service—Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NES)*, January 20, 2000.

³⁶ *SWB*, November 30, 1994.

It is common sense to Israelis that negotiations anchored in absolute principles cannot go anywhere. Since it is assumed that conflicts must end in compromise, *pshara*, “principled debate” is seen as a sure recipe for immobility. From the Israeli perspective, the highest ethics in the resolution of conflict are forthright argument and a pragmatic willingness to compromise (“give and take”). There is little interest in a disputation over principles, *ekronot*, a concept with theological and philosophical associations. Debating the foundations of belief seems fruitless and counterproductive in what is perceived as a practical political discussion. As talks proceed, negotiators are expected to stand firm on “vital interests.” Rather than a philosophical point of departure, these are a concrete bottom line, below which negotiators cannot make concessions, which is a very different way of looking at things. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak referred to “vital interests” five times in an interview following the failure of the crucial summit between President Bill Clinton and Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad in Geneva on March 26, 2000.³⁷ He meant satisfactory security arrangements and protection of Israel’s water supply, not abstract principles.

In Arabic discourse, it is the neglect of principles that offends common sense. A former Egyptian ambassador to the United States explained that in speaking about American culture to Egyptian audiences, he could find no Arabic word for “pragmatism.”³⁸ For President Assad, the only obstacle to peace was Israel’s refusal to accept his principled, utterly logical position: “The Israelis are obstructive. They do not seek a genuine peace between equals. While everyone wants his legitimate interests, they want their—or what they deem to be their—interests, be they legitimate or illegitimate. While they want their dignity preserved, they want the other’s dignity lost.”³⁹

The principled-pragmatic dichotomy generated an interminable and inconclusive peace process in which Syria was especially unwilling to negotiate the territorial issue. At the Geneva summit, Clinton communicated to Assad Barak’s readiness to withdraw from the Golan Heights to the 1923 international boundary but not to the military line of control of June 4, 1967. Israel declined to concede to Syria riparian rights to the Sea of Galilee, based on land seized by Syria before 1967 beyond the international boundary. An enraged Assad simply refused to negotiate on this basis. Following the meeting, Clinton acidly commented, “The ball’s in his [Assad’s] court now, and I’m going to look forward to hearing from him.”⁴⁰ He explained that once Assad had heard the details of

³⁷ SWB, March 28, 2000.

³⁸ Abdel Raouf El Reedy, “Reflection on American Negotiating Behavior”; paper presented at United States Institute of Peace Conference on American Negotiating Behavior, Wye Plantation, July 25, 2000.

³⁹ SWB, December 3, 1994.

⁴⁰ BBC World News, March 29, 2000.

the Israeli peace proposals, it was not enough for him to reject them out of hand, but he was bound to come up with a “specific and comprehensive response on all the issues.” Clinton added, “If we’re going to have a negotiation, I don’t think it’s enough to say, I don’t like your position, come back and see me when I like your position. . . . It takes two people coming up with ideas—or three sides, in this case, if we are being asked to mediate it.”⁴¹

This clearly stated American (and Israeli) procedural expectations that negotiations were to be conducted on the basis of give and take and a willingness to compromise. Syria did not share this assumption. Assad felt bound to reiterate his original principled position because to put forward a counterproposal would have been to agree to bargain away irreducible sacred principles. Failure of the Geneva summit plunged the peace process into protracted deadlock.

As Clinton hints, Syria and Israel also lacked a common understanding of the role of the American mediator. In the Israeli tradition a mediator, the *metavech*, plays a role analogous to that of an intermediary in a business transaction and is certainly not envisaged as imposing a judgment on the disputants. Itamar Rabinovich, chief Israeli negotiator with Syria from 1992 to 1995, believed that it was “difficult to envisage a deal being completed without the United States. But I think we feel very strongly that there also needs to be an element in which the matchmaker leaves the room, leaving the would-be groom and bride for themselves for a few minutes to decide whether they want to live together for the next x years.”⁴² Barak went even further, suggesting that “the U.S.’s most useful role might be to step back and not be involved day to day, hour by hour, in Israel’s discussions with its neighbors and adversaries.” This conception was compatible but not identical with the more activist American view of mediation as “facilitation”—“a position where the parties would be negotiating, and we would help.”⁴³

Neither conception went far enough for Syria. In the *tahkim/wasata* tradition, the international mediator is not expected to facilitate a negotiation, but to come up with an offer that cannot be refused. Indeed, almost all serious disagreements between Arab states are resolved through the good offices of a *wasit*. As Lebanese Foreign Minister Faris Buwayz said in 1997, when talks were at an impasse, “The United States is required to return to play the role of impartial broker. In other words, to act as an arbiter to implement what was agreed in Madrid [in 1991].”⁴⁴ In practice, this meant compelling Israeli Prime

⁴¹ White House Press Conference, March 29, 2000.

⁴² Itamar Rabinovich’s remarks to Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 21, 1995.

⁴³ White House background briefing by senior administration official, December 14, 1999.

⁴⁴ FBIS–NES, October 1, 1997.

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accept withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, line of control. When Assad came to meet Clinton in Geneva, he expected him to present an American arbitral decision, not to pass on an Israeli proposal.

A third profound contradiction between the Israeli and Syrian paradigms concerned the nature of peace and reconciliation. Since the parties could not agree on the objective of the entire exercise, this made it highly problematic from the start. Syria's conception of peace was derived from the formalistic idea of *salam*, a contractual agreement between states putting an end to a state of war and establishing diplomatic relations between them. *Salam* is distinguished from the key conflict resolution notion of *sulh*, which is a reconciliation between communities and peoples, after which they live together in harmony. Throughout the peace negotiations, Syria never concealed its distaste for dealing with Israel or its insistence on minimizing contact even after the conclusion of a peace treaty. In a revealing speech, Faruq al-Shar' presented his vision of *salam*: "It does not mean that we shall lay down our arms in peacetime. . . . The significance of making peace in the future is to transform this conflict into a political, ideological, commercial, and economic conflict in which we may be in an advantageous position."⁴⁵ Syria was at best offering cold state-to-state *salam*, not warm people-to-people *sulh*.

In line with the Hebrew interpretation of *shalom*, which incorporates both *salam* and *sulh*, Israel took it for granted that peace with Syria would naturally entail more than a formal end to belligerency and the bare bones of diplomatic relations. For a long time, Israelis entertained the notion, implicit in the concept of *shalom*, that a peacetime relationship would be one of friendship and harmony—an "expression of affection," as Uri Savir ironically notes.⁴⁶ When it became impossible to maintain this illusion any longer, Israel fell back on its old idea of *normalizatzia*, a term adapted from the English in the 1970s. Normalization was a good word because it perfectly expressed Israel's wish for normalcy in its relations with its neighbors while reflecting the deeply held assumption that when a conflict is resolved, there is a return to a normal state of relations. It did not require "reconciliation," an idea for which Hebrew has no exact equivalent at the communal level. Normalization would include embassies, obviously, but it would also include borders open to people and goods. Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Uri Savir also envisaged communication and transport links; cooperation in the development of energy, water, and roads; and multilateral regional economic ties, as well as tourism and the joint development of the Golan.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Al-Safir* (Beirut), February 11, 2000.

⁴⁶ Uri Savir, *The Process* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 272. The author replaced Itamar Rabinovich as chief Israeli negotiator with Syria in January 1996 under Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

From the beginning the Syrians were distressed by the term “normalization,” which they categorically refused to accept. “We do not like the word normalization” (*tatbi’*), Faruq al-Shar’ admitted. “We would rather refer to the ordinary peace relations” (*’alaqat salam ’adiyah*).⁴⁸ In the January 2000 Shepherdstown peace talks, Syrian negotiators fought tooth and nail to ensure that future ties with Israel be conducted in a committee of normal peaceful relations, not normalization.⁴⁹ There has been conjecture that Syria disliked the idea of normalization because *tatbi’* is associated with the taming or breaking-in of a domestic animal. By implication, *tatbi’* would entail the forced submission of Syria to Israel’s will. Throughout the negotiations, Syria was deeply concerned to prevent a settlement that would extend Israeli influence over the Bilad al-Sham, the historical lands of Greater Syria, or bestow “special privileges” on Israel.⁵⁰ By ordinary (*’adiyah*), Syria meant official but minimal. *’Adiyah* is the term applied to Iraq–Iran relations.⁵¹

The correct conclusion to draw from this brief survey is not that semantic dissonance rules out conflict resolution; rather it complicates and delays an already difficult exercise. The very point of linguistic-cultural analysis is to alert the parties at an early stage to the presence of rich points of incomprehension. In this way, they can avoid the worst contradictions and construct bridging mechanisms to overcome others. It is also up to the third-party mediator to map out areas of dissonance and guide the rivals through the semantic minefield. Since the United States is often that mediator, it is essential that American practitioners and scholars cultivate linguistic self-consciousness and foreign language competence.

There have been some encouraging successes. One of the most notable in recent years derived from the compatibility between the Hebrew and Arabic concepts of “apology,” *slichá* and *’afw* respectively. In March 1997, a Jordanian soldier opened fire on a party of Israeli schoolgirls visiting the nature reserve of Naharayim on the Jordan River, killing seven and wounding six. The atrocity plunged Jordanian-Israeli relations into deep crisis. Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy reacted to Jordan’s official expression of condolences with the pronouncement, “There can be no forgiveness, no absolution,” drawing upon liturgical terms used on the Day of Atonement.

To defuse the crisis and restore harmony to relations between the two countries, King Hussein and his brother Prince Hassan evoked consonant Muslim and Jewish traditions. Levy meant that there are some deeds only God can

⁴⁸ FBIS-NES, November 20, 1995.

⁴⁹ James P. Rubin, State Department briefing on Shepherdstown Peace Talks, January 5, 2000.

⁵⁰ The Bilad al-Sham includes Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.

⁵¹ FBIS-NES, July 23, 1996.

forgive. But in the Jewish tradition, a penitent can beg man and God for pardon (*slichah*). So, too, in the Muslim tradition of '*afw*. Immediately flying to the site in military uniform, Prince Hassan symbolically acknowledged responsibility for the episode. He told the Israeli defense minister that he was "deeply shamed by what has happened here."⁵²

Both religions also share the custom of the tent or mourning booth, where visitors comfort grieving relatives.⁵³ Cutting short a state visit to Spain and postponing a meeting with President Clinton, King Hussein flew straight to Israel. Accompanied by two of his children, stressing that he was a father as well as a king, Hussein visited the homes of bereaved parents. He made "the grim rounds from one grief-stricken home to the next, shaking the hands of relatives, embracing and kissing some, and offering words of sympathy in Arabic and English." Finding the families seated on the floor in ritual mourning, he knelt next to them. "I feel that I've lost a child," he told one bereaved father. "And I feel that if there is anything left in life, it will be spent to insure that all the children enjoy the kind of peace and security that we never had in our times."⁵⁴

King Hussein's visit brought some hope to a situation of profound grief and depression. An ordinary Israeli was quoted as saying, "I was very moved, even to tears. This is such a noble man. A special person. When he knelt before those people, you could see the sadness in his eyes. He is simply human, a human being."⁵⁵

⁵² *Washington Post*, March 14, 1997.

⁵³ More precisely, the mourning booth is customary among Yemenite Jews. Other Jewish communities sit on low stools or on the ground for seven days of mourning inside the family home.

⁵⁴ *New York Times*, March 17, 1997.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*