

The Fundamental Communicative Right: A Brazilian Scholar's Plea

By Robert Craig, University of Colorado

Book Review, First Published in: ICA Newsletter, International Communication Association
Volume 31, Number 6, August 2003, page 2 and 5.

Should communication be recognized as a fundamental human right? Professor Francisco Gomes de Matos (Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil; email: fegm@hotmail.com.br) has recently circulated a “plea for the fundamental communicative right, namely the right which all language users (learners included therein) should have: the right to learn how to communicate peacefully for the good of mankind.” In an article prepared for Federation des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV) World News, a publication of the World Federation of Modern Language Teachers (<http://www.fiplv.org>), Professor Gomes de Matos describes his formulation of the fundamental communicative right as “an in-depth integration of the following fundamental human rights: the right to live in peace, the right to learn, and the right to communicate.”

A professor of peace linguistics, linguistic and intercultural rights, English, and Portuguese, Dr. Gomes de Matos authored in 1984 a plea for a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights that would recognize the rights of all people to use their mother tongue and learn other languages. His plea reflected an international movement that led to the approval in 1996 of a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights by an assembly of NGOs, PEN chapters, and experts meeting in Barcelona with the support of UNESCO (<http://www.linguistic-declaration.org>).

The movement to establish the principles of the 1996 Declaration in international law continues. A brief quotation indicates the Declaration's interesting relevance to communication theory: “All languages are the expression of a collective identity and of a distinct way of perceiving and describing reality and must therefore be able to enjoy the conditions required for their development in all functions” (<http://www.linguistic-declaration.org/decl-gb.htm>, Article 7).

According to The Linguapax Institute (<http://www.linguapax.org>), a UNESCO-affiliated organization that promotes language diversity and multilingualism, “Respect for all linguistic communities constitutes a key factor for peace.” The association between linguistic rights and peace is also at the basis of current work by Professor Gomes de Matos in peace linguistics and his plea for a fundamental right (and responsibility) to learn how to communicate peacefully. Communication and language education, he believes, should “be planned so as to systematically include lessons centred on lexical items which can enhance peaceful communication.” In an article on “Teaching Vocabulary for Peace Education” (ESL Magazine, July-August 2002, pp. 22-25), Professor Gomes de Matos describes several techniques for “helping learners to humanize the way they use their English” and includes an introductory bibliography on peace linguistics. His pleas for linguistic rights and the fundamental communicative right have been endorsed by such academic luminaries as Noam Chomsky, David Crystal, Morton Deutsch, and Dell Hymes.

Freedom of speech, privacy, and media-related law and policy issues have long been central concerns of communication scholarship. Language policy and a broader human rights

conception of communication should be equally as central to our understanding and practice of communication in the emerging global context. The plea of Professor Gomes de Matos deserves our attention.