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Language and Aviation Safety: Sovereignty versus Sanctity of Life

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Title: Language and Aviation Safety: Sovereignty versus Sanctity of Life

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Abstract. This article identifies political factors that impede adequate language training for flight crews. These factors also are impediments to aviation safety.

After-action reports of fatal aviation accidents as well as near-disasters too often implicate communication inadequacies and anomalies as associated and even causal factors. Contributions to communication inadequacies and anomalies often comprise personality conflict within and between individuals; power and authority configurations and dynamics within and between individuals; sensory, perceptual, cognitive, and motivational dysfunctions within individuals; and language deficiencies.

These last often are based on specific political phenomena such as the following: (1) Ideology and associated supporting organizations dictating that proficiency on a written test of a language as a second language--e.g., English--in situations having little to do with aviation will suffice; (2) Ideology and associated supporting organizations dictating that a similar written test even with aviation content will suffice; (3) Ideology and associated supporting organizations dictating that oral testing (expressive and receptive) will suffice--even if at levels of repetition, fidelity, and ecological validity deemed insufficient by exhaustive scientific research and negotiation of competing narratives and constructed realities; (4) The requirement of foreign language proficiency being perceived as an example of cultural imperialism, while adhering to the requirement is deemed as unfaithful to one's nationality; (5) The requirement of foreign language proficiency is deemed appropriate for satisficing--not satisfying--by organizational culture or by individual judgment tinged with antithetical worldviews.

The moral of the story is clear for aviation safety authorities charged with attenuating language-related disaster. Intervention must be founded on group, organizational, and even more macromolecular levels of analysis--as well as the individual. The alternative is that all too petty sovereignties will continue to take precedence over the sanctity of life. (See Bowers, C., Deaton, J., Oser, R., et al. (1995). Impact of automation on aircrew communication and decision-making performance. *International Journal of Aviation Psychology*, 5, 145-167; Murray, S.R. (1997). Deliberate decision-making by aircraft pilots: A simple reminder to avoid decision-making under panic. *International Journal of Aviation Psychology*, 7, 83-100; Skogstad, A., Dyregrov, A., & Hellesoy, O.H. (1995). Cockpit cabin crew interaction: Satisfaction with communication and information exchange. *Aviation, Space, and Environmental Medicine*, 66, 841-848; Stout, R.J., Salas, E., and Fowlkes, J.E. (1997). Enhancing teamwork in complex environments through team training. *Group Dynamics*, 1, 169-182.) (Keywords: Aviation, Communication, Language, Safety.)