

**Ryan, S. (2014). Review of the book *The language of peace: Communicating to create harmony*, by Rebecca L. Oxford. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 389-392. doi: 10.14746/ssl.t.2014.4.2.10
<http://www.sslt.amu.edu.pl>**

In *The Language of Peace: Communicating to Create Harmony*, Rebecca Oxford invites students, educators, and researchers to think about language in new and challenging ways. The book is probably most suitable as a text for courses relating to media, communication, or culture. It offers a comprehensive discussion of how language can be used to reduce conflict while promoting peace and harmony, and this discussion is interweaved with a practical concern for how the various themes of the book may be pursued in educational settings. These are lofty aims indeed. However, Oxford is well aware that she is setting the bar very high and that some readers may regard the aims and claims of her book with a degree of skepticism; in the introduction, she is careful to address “those who are cynical about the possibilities of peace”, reassuring the reader that the book offers something more substantial than implausible idealism. As someone who certainly falls into this ‘cynical’ category, I have to confess that my initial reaction upon opening this book was one of doubt. Nevertheless, I was also intrigued to find out to what extent she could achieve her aim of convincing even the ‘cynical’ reader of the possibilities of using language to enhance peace within oneself, in relationships with others, across nations and cultures, and with the environment we inhabit.

The book is organized into four distinct sections. The first section, *Part A*, entitled *Fundamentals of Communication for Peace*, establishes the theoretical foundations for the book and elaborates on some of its principal themes. In this section we explore understandings of the term peace and how the use of language is integral to peace and conflict. The discussion of the various understandings of peace spans notions of peace as an inner personal state to broader considerations of world peace. Underpinning all of this is an exploration of the links between these various levels of peace, their interconnections, and their interdependence. The next two sections are the ones most likely to be of immediate interest to language educators. In these sections we encounter familiar themes from language education but approach them from a highly original and refreshing perspective. In *Part B: Learning the Language of Peace through Words and Images*, we focus on the use of language and images for peaceful aims. What is so refreshing, and even inspiring, about this section of the book is that despite its grand aims, it is clearly and firmly grounded in educational realities. Here, Oxford provides the book with practical substance by offering concrete examples of some of the ways in which learners and educators may study language and how it can be used to enhance peace. The core of this section is centered around critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is used to analyze key speeches from well-known peacemakers, such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi. At no time does the discussion slip into gratuitous platitudes, instead it adopts a hard-nosed, rigorous analysis of language. From a practical angle, the chapters in this section also offer ideas for how educators may expand upon the material in their own classes. I particularly enjoyed the implicit re-alignment of the aims of CDA, from being primarily concerned with exploring how language can lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding and conflict to an analysis of how language can contribute to harmony.

In a similar fashion, *Part C: Using Peace Language with Other Cultures* reframes intercultural communication as a means of promoting peace; instead of concentrating on simplistic differences between cultural groups we find an insightful, positive focus on using language and communication to create empathy and dialogue between cultures. *Part D* consists of a single, co-authored chapter based upon a study exploring people's definitions and understanding of peace. All of the chapters in the book feature exercises for both readers and students. Although each chapter could be used separately as a stand-alone resource, there is a satisfying coherence running throughout the book as a whole.

One of the most impressive features for me was how the book never shirks the big questions, or the bold statements: Oxford is unequivocal in her view that peace is a genuine possibility and considers the contributions we can all make through our discussions and our use of language. This makes a welcome change from the standard academic diet of hedges and qualifications. I have to admit that as a reader there were several occasions when I thought that Oxford was being overly ambitious but on each occasion she managed to skillfully connect the idealism to practical realities in a way that I found subtly persuasive. The authorial voice switches between a committed activist's enthusiasm and an effortless scholarly erudition, making for a lively, stimulating read. The thematic scope of the book is truly impressive, ranging from intercultural communication to geopolitics, from aspects of psychology to critical media studies. This is also true of its tone and register, at times high-minded and idealistic while at others scrupulously systematic. And what is even more impressive is that at no time does the author opt for the short cut and offer superficial overviews. The book is as deep as it is wide. However, such an approach does have its pitfalls. Few readers will have an informed interest in all of the areas covered; we all have our own specific interests and inevitably there may be certain parts of the book that appear less compelling than others. For example, in my own case, I found myself skimming over the poetry section, since my own brain appears to have a huge and resolutely stubborn blind spot when it comes to verse. Nevertheless, this is a minor criticism: too much is surely preferable to too little.

My overriding impression of this book is that it is one that made me stop and think about who I am and what I do as a language educator. That, in fact, represents very high praise indeed. After over twenty years (and counting) of involvement in language education, there is a tendency to get set in one's ways and become resistant to new ideas or practices. More specifically, the book encouraged me to consider how language education may be about more than simply 'repairing' what is wrong with learners' use of language and reflect on how as language educators we can dare to believe in the possibility of improving ourselves, the people around us, and the world we live in. For a seasoned language educator, this was simultaneously unexpected and reinvigorating. Although the book does not explicitly refer to positive psychology, it does share some of the same fundamental premises. Just as positive psychology is concerned with enhancing well-being rather than simply fixing what is broken, this book investigates the positive contribution that can be made through the use of language. The experience of reading *The Language of Peace: Communicating to Create Harmony* left this 'cynical' reviewer profoundly grateful for the opportunity to step outside his comfort zone. I suspect that for

many others involved in language education the book may require a similar leap out of the comfort zone into unfamiliar territory. And I also imagine that many such readers will find the book in parts thought-provoking, frustrating, and inspiring. However, I am sure that all who make that effort to engage with this book will ultimately find it a highly positive, rewarding experience opening up unexpected areas for reflection and professional growth.

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