

THE SEARCH FOR UNITY - A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

by Lopeti Foliaki

Ed. Note: *Although only indirectly related to the teaching of English as a Second Language, this article should prove interesting to all who work with Second Language English speakers.*

"Speech, which sets man apart from the rest of creation and is his greatest social asset, serves paradoxically to separate him from his fellow humans. What amounts to a binding tie inside the family, the tribe and the nation, acts as a barrier between those groups and others constituted a short distance away."¹

This quotation from a lecture by Professor Jose Martel, of the College of the City of New York, shows the essence of the language problem. Men are not much better than deaf-mutes when they meet humans belonging to a different language group. To bridge the gap from one language group to another, a bridge language, a Universal language is needed.

In San Francisco, on June 25, 1965, the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations, the President of the General Assembly declared: "We must give tools to man to enable him to make a better world for his children." What tool could be more basic than language? President Lyndon B. Johnson, speaking immediately afterwards on the same occasion, named ignorance, together with hunger and disease among "the ancient enemies of all mankind."³ Ignorance must be overcome by knowledge and understanding. This means, first of all, literacy and education, but it also means the ability to communicate with people beyond the narrow borders of countries and nations.

The language problem has many facets. Its implications in education, science, business and politics are innumerable. There has been a growing awareness of the fact that increased emphasis on foreign language study, though useful and urgent, will not suffice, but that for worldwide use a prac-

tical, neutral and easy-to-learn world language is necessary.

The use of five official languages by the UN points up the inherent difficulty of a situation wherein all major addresses have to be interpreted from the language in which they are made into four other tongues, and all important documents have to come out in quintuplicate, (English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese) at the cost of enormous amounts of time labor and money.

The language difficulties at all international conferences are enormous. The selection of participants is strongly influenced by linguistic considerations. Many otherwise perfectly qualified persons refrain from attending conferences because they feel that their knowledge of foreign languages is inadequate. Many countries send delegates who are good linguists, though their other qualifications are sometimes only second-rate.

A great variety of devices has been used to overcome the language obstacle. Speeches are often secured in advance, translated into different languages, mimeographed, and distributed among delegates. Sometimes members are seated according to language groups and asked, after each speech, to withdraw into neighboring rooms where translations in several languages are given simultaneously. Obviously, discussions and proceedings are very slow with these translations, because the whole conference has to wait for the translator who is slowest. Other delays are due to the fact that people, talking in a foreign language with which they are not thoroughly familiar, are likely to need more time for making themselves clear. Their speeches become stammered, long-winded, repetitious, and hard to follow, consuming the nerves as well as the time of

A PROPOSAL OF INSTITUTING TO HELP UNRAVEL WORLD

their fellow delegates. (It is an art to express oneself briefly, forcefully, and concisely, even in one's own language.)

The most important technical advice invented for the facilitation of international conferences is the Filene-Finlay Speech translator, sometimes called the "earphone system." In this system interpreters for different languages are placed in glass-enclosed booths and talk into microphones while the speaker is delivering his speech. The seats of the delegates are equipped with earphones connected with the translators' microphones. By pressing a button, a delegate can choose the language in which he wishes to hear the speech.

This system has limitations and disadvantages. The most serious obstacle lies in the physical and nervous limitations of translators. It is more difficult to listen to a speech through a machine than it is to listen to the interpreter directly. Mistranslations slip through more easily than with other systems under which there are always a few persons in the audience who have understood the original speech and can check the translator and obtain rectifications when serious mistakes occur. It is also rather disconcerting to see a speaker talking and gesticulating while hearing through the earphone a translation, not of what he is saying, but of what he said a while ago.

The Filene-Finlay system is of no help outside the assembly hall. At most international conferences, personal contacts between delegates from different countries are more important than speeches and official discussions. It is a sad, but unfortunately a common experience, to see delegates take their meals and spend their leisure hours in the company of colleagues from their own countries.

Another deterrent is the high cost of the Filene-Finlay system. Theoretically the

number of languages in which simultaneous translations are possible is unlimited. Practically, however, only four or five, at the utmost six, languages can be used as it is enormously expensive to make arrangements for such potential needs as translation from Polish to Chinese, from Italian to Norwegian or from Portuguese into Bulgarian. So the Filene-Finlay system, even under the most efficient management, is unable to eliminate the monopoly of a few major languages.

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Neither the Filene-Finlay Speech Translator nor any other system of translations can overcome the basic inequality between delegates speaking their mother tongue and those who have to express themselves in a language not their own. Therefore the need for a universal language. A universal language will not of itself prevent international conflict, but it will remove areas of deliberate or accidental misunderstanding. It will clear up muddled situations. Above all, it will aid man in his search for the truth, now so frequently distorted by factors which, though often planned, are almost as often of a fortuitous nature.

Great as is the use of translators and interpreters by diplomatic and governmental agencies, these agencies are far outstripped by business houses dealing with imports and exports. Government agencies prepare dictionaries and phrasebooks for the fields that concern them; but they cannot even begin to vie with the numerous technical, legal, financial, professional and commercial

lexicons that are produced each year for the exclusive use of firms engaged in private enterprises involving two or more countries.

As the volume of international trade grows, the need for linguistic understanding becomes greater. With the increase in number and variety of products, with the greater complexity of machinery and equipment that is sent out from one country to another, the need for precision and accuracy increases. Haphazard translations of business letters and written instructions for the use of machinery, casual interpretations of arrangements between importer and exporter, are no longer sufficient, in fact, they may be extremely harmful.

Our systems of interpretation and translation improve as time goes on, and as more and better commercial and technical dictionaries become available. Yet it is a curious fact that they always lag behind the need. The specialized vocabulary of trade and technology changes rapidly in each language, innovations appear everyday, and the dictionary that was adequate ten years ago is hopelessly behind the times today.

Add to this the local differences of terminology within what passes for one language; a term used by an Englishman in a certain meaning may have an entirely different meaning to an American; the Spanish of Spain and that of Argentina, though basically the same language, may use altogether different terms for an object, product, or mechanical part. The complexity of present-day business terminology on the international level thus becomes even more apparent.

A single language, carefully governed by a single international language academy would prove an inestimable boom to trade among nations. It would eliminate uncertainties along with the multiplicity of language forms and translations. The importer in Tonga would know at once and precisely what the exporter in San Francisco has to offer. There would be untold economy of time, effort, money and manpower.

From the standpoint of the host country, the tourist is almost invariably a gift from the gods. He brings in and spends foreign currencies which would be difficult to procure by trade, save at the cost of cutting imports and pushing exports to the point where it hurts.

If there were a language common to the tourist and the countries he sees, the possibility of pleasant contracts, conversations, enlightenment as to local conditions and problems, and absorption of the native culture would be enhanced at least tenfold. For lack of such a tongue, the tourist must go begging for someone who speaks his language.

Religion is a field in which the multiplicity of human tongues has always been recognized. Ever since the command laid upon the Apostles to go forth and preach in different tongues, missionary work has been done with missionaries acquiring the language of the locality to which each is assigned. It might even be claimed that the original linguists were missionaries, since in many instances it is to them that we owe grammars, dictionaries and Bible translations of many obscure tongues.

What would be the impact of a universal language upon churches. It would undoubtedly facilitate their work on a purely material plane, making accessible to them, without linguistic effort and training on their part, masses of humanity which are at present hard to reach.

A common language would serve to clarify differences in interpretation of doctrine which ultimately lead to confusion and religious strife. But above all if man is truly to be set free he must have access to truth. The barriers which cut him off from this truth are often not of his own making and universal language would serve as a bridge, enabling him to find truth more readily.

Literary works are normally produced in one of the many existing literary tongues. If they are found to have merit, then they are translated and republished in other languages. This is a slow, expensive and unsatisfactory process. It is often the case that works of true literary merit go untranslated by reason of limited commercial appeal. It just as often happens that a work which is a literary gem in the original loses a great deal of its flavor in translation because the work is handled by a translator who is technically, but not literarily competent. True literary translation is not a trade, but an art.

It is one of the most standard arguments of opponents of the international language that its establishment will lead to a loss of literary values. Actually a universal tongue would lead to an enhancement of such

values. Instead of the present hit or miss system, every book appearing in a national tongue would also appear in a single translation which would serve the entire world.

It would be far easier to create a body of truly competent literary translators into the universal language than it is to secure suitable translators into the very numerous literary languages of the world.

The argument that a universal language not having grown and developed out of centuries-old human experience would be unsuited to carry literary values is raised only against constructed languages. But proponents of this fail to remember that a constructed tongue, evolving out of existing languages, would not be subject to the handicaps of having to evolve painfully out of a material into a spiritual civilization. It would rather spring full-grown out of its parent tongues-like Minerva out of the forehead of Jupiter-and at once fall heir to the blended cultural values and literary devices of the most developed languages. That this is both possible and true is proved by the most thoroughly established of our present constructed language, Esperanto, in which a considerable body of literature, both original and in translation, has already appeared.

Since the seventeenth century days of Descartes, Dalgarno and Wilkins, it is estimated that six hundred different proposals have been advanced for the world's linguistic troubles. The proposals can be classified into five groups: First comes the proposal to use a given language just as it stands. Select a given language, make it the official international tongue throughout the world, put it into the schools on a parity with the national languages, and let it serve, just as it is, for the purposes of global communications.

Next come suggestions to use two or more natural languages, either as zonal tongues to serve certain areas of the earth, which would not give us an international language, but a series of geographically separated international languages or to be learned and used bilingually or trilingually by all the peoples of the earth.

Thirdly, it has been proposed to have national languages modified, in one fashion or another, to make them more accessible to foreign speakers, or even to their own.

It has been suggested that language mixtures, where two tongues are combined, be used. Last of the five proposals is the use of constructed tongues which may be either

a priori language or a posteriori language

A priori language is one which has no connection with pre-existing tongues, but rather endeavors to link language with logical thought.⁴ Commercial codes used for economy in sending telegraphic messages are good examples, while on a more limited scale one may refer to musical notation, or to astronomical, chemical or other symbols. As applied to an international tongue, the great advantage of a priori system lies in its complete neutrality, since it favors or resembles none of the known languages.

One such system in use today are the universal graphic symbols known as Glyphs. Glyphs are the only universal graphic communications devices that are in public use. They are beginning to appear on highways, in world's fairs, at hotels and inns and on machines and appliances the world over.⁵ The advantages of glyphs are twofold-they don't require knowledge of a language, written or spoken. The message of the glyphs is unambiguous, simple, and understandable to anybody who has learned it. Glyphs create a direct and immediate impact and thus permit immediate response. This applies as well to those who know a language as to those who do not.

However glyphs will not suffice for our

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need for a universal language which will enable people from any part of the world to communicate with people from any other part. It has been suggested in recent years that the language of the deaf which conveys concepts independently of the words of a particular language does in action, in face-to-face communication what a written ideational language could do for speakers of different languages.⁶

A posteriori language is by definition one constructed on the analogy of existing tongues. This does not mean, however, that it may not have arbitrary features, particularly in the matter of grammar. All existing natural tongues display irregularities of one sort or another, which complicate the language for the learner and make language study a chore. The elimination of irregularities is a predominant feature of practically all constructed tongues. Aside from that, they may or may not borrow grammatical structure from the languages on which they draw. One might for example, copy the grammar of Spanish, at the same time regularizing it, to this extent. All nouns shall be masculine or feminine, with all masculine nouns ending in O and all feminine nouns ending in A. The plural of all nouns shall be formed by adding S to the singular. Now we have a language which, so far as nouns are concerned, is modeled on Spanish, yet displays regularity, which Spanish does not. If to this selection of grammatical rules we added a vocabulary drawn from Spanish, we have a posteriori language.

Esperanto is probably the best known of the posteriori languages devised to solve the communication problem. Invented in 1887 by Dr. L.L. Zamenhof, a Polish Jew who was a physician, it is a melange of European languages glued together by a very simple grammar. Unlike natural languages, which are laced with maddening irregularities, Esperanto is almost scientifically precise and consistent.⁷

Phonetic spelling is one of the most important features of Esperanto. Because every letter of the alphabet corresponds to one, and only one, sound and vice-versa, coupled with a simple syllabic arrangement, Esperanto is a harmonious tongue, easy to speak, read and spell. One drawback that has often been criticized is the use of accented letters of which there are six c, g, h, j, s, and u. The main stream of criticism is that this complicates matters for

printers in countries speaking languages, such as English, which do not use accented letters.⁸

The Esperanto definite article is la, invariable like English "the." All nouns without exception, end in -o, all adjectives in -a, all adverbs in -e, all infinitives in -i. Nouns and adjectives are made plural by the addition of -j; an accusative form is provided by adding -n in both singular and plural: la bona patro and la bonan patron mean "The good father", the first as subject, the second as object; "the good fathers," is translated by la bonaj patroj and la bonajn patrojn. A verb, which ends in -i in the infinitive shifts to -as in the present, -is in the past, -os in the future, -us in the conditional, -u in the imperative (ami, "to love," miamas, "love"; vi amis, "you loved," li amos, "he will love"; si amus, "she would love," amu, "love")⁹ The vocabulary is a blend of Germanic and Latin-Romance, with plenty of Greek and Latin roots and very little in the way of other groups.

Points which favor Esperanto are that it is a completely regular language, based upon only 16 grammatical rules. It is claimed to be simple enough to be mastered by a person of moderate intelligence in just six months, yet flexible and powerful enough to handle the most difficult subtleties of legal jargon. It is composed of some 900 root words capable of expansion into a vocabulary of over 20,000 words, a vocabulary that by its very structure automatically simplified subject-heading and indexing.¹⁰ Esperanto is being used by hundreds of thousands of people all over the world in a great variety of fields. It is already of tremendous practical use and well worth an investment of time, effort and money. Those learning it acquire a key to the world, an instrument of great-practical value, a treasure of cultural enrichment, and make at the same time a real contribution to the cause of international understanding and world peace.

However to say that a universal language, be it Esperanto or any other linguistic choice, will establish world unity and abolish wars forever is wishful thinking. History reminds us of the many civil wars among peoples speaking the same tongue. The most that we can expect is that the universal language will, through the removal of linguistic misunderstanding and through the creation of a healthy atmosphere wherein men regard one another as fellow human

beings endowed with the capacity of intelligible speech, effectively aid world peace.

A universal language may help to prevent such accidents as the drowning of a Japanese tourist in Tonga, who, warned of a strong undertow but unable to understand, went swimming in a dangerous area. The disasters of the *Titanic* and *Andrea Doria* both involved heavy loss of life due to language misunderstanding between passengers and crew.

But without going into the comparatively rare instances of the difference between life and death made by knowledge of another tongue, a world language would mean that any immigrant, tourist, or traveller coming from one country to another would be able to understand and be understood by those around them, to the evident comfort and general satisfaction of all concerned.

A world language would do away with necessity for publishing a magazine in seven languages, and conducting conferences in four or five different languages. We should no longer need elaborate schools for UN simultaneous interpreters and foreign service translators if we had a world tongue. In science and technology, a world language would enable man to make the entire world output directly and immediately available to everyone. Important discoveries and inventions would not have to wait for slow, difficult and often inexact translations. To attempt to cover all the advantages a universal language would bring, would be a separate paper in itself. However I would like to mention one last advantage of considerable importance. A universal language would help solve the internal problems in countries having large and numerous linguistic minorities, or in which many languages are at present official. In a country like Switzerland, with its official German, French and Italian, there are language difficulties, because not all the inhabitants speak all the official tongues of the country with equal fluency.

But there are far larger and more important national units than Switzerland to which the world language would be a distinct boon in internal affairs - nations like India, the Soviet Union, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

In India alone, there are over 225 languages and dialects, with 24 major tongues accounting for 96 percent of the population. Hindi is the official language

(with English the trade language) but there has been violent opposition. There have been "walkouts" on the part of members of the Indian Parliament from Southern India in protest against the use of Hindi which they cannot understand. There have been violent language riots in many parts of the country. The Indian government, powerless to solve the language problems, has been endeavoring, with little success, to divide the country into provinces that would follow language lines, but there are often no clear-cut linguistic lines, and entire regions are in dispute. There is no doubt that a universal language would prove an inestimable blessing to India.

What the advent of a universal language would mean to India and similar areas can only be estimated. All the people, regardless of dialect, could use it among themselves without the haunting fear that one group would thereby obtain predominance over the others. It would also give these groups a means of communicating with the entire world and give them a means of quickly enriching their knowledge and information.

There remains one last problem. Would national languages be displaced by the international language and die out? Or would they exist side by side with the new language? I feel that, because the international language would be valid at all times and in all places, it would probably progress at the expense of national languages. As time goes on, there might be less use of national tongues and more use of the international language. Writers would prefer the new medium, which would give them access to world markets without the need of difficult and expensive translations. Dante admitted that the main reason that led him to write his *Divine Comedy* in Italian rather than in the Latin of his day was that he wished to reach a broader public.¹¹

The final outcome seems clear. The national languages of today will live on for centuries, but their use will tend to become more and more restricted. Ultimately, they will turn into cultural relics, like Greek and Latin of today. Is this good or bad? Consider that language is forever changing and that the English for the year 2500 will differ significantly from the English of today in any case. The people of tomorrow will evolve their own forms of life-political, economic and cultural. Many imperfections

of the present day are glaring. Why should we wish to impose them upon future generations? It is conceivable that some might not wish to pass on some of our political and economic institutions, but few indeed would be those who would not wish to pass on to them the advances we have made in the fields of science, medicine and technology, the tools to human happiness and progress. To these, let us add one more tool - a tongue that will permit all of our descendants regardless of color, race, nationality, or religion, to exchange thoughts freely.

"An international language is rapidly ceasing to be a luxury that can be put off into the future; it is becoming an immediate necessity. If we are wise, we shall anticipate the acute need of the future and provide for it, just as wise city planners make provisions for expansion of their growing city and the traffic problems that growth will involve."¹²

¹G.A. Connor, *Esperanto, the World Language*, 1966, p. 6.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Mario Pei, *One Language for the World*, 1958, p. 141.

⁵M. Mead & R. Modley, "Communication Among All People, Everywhere." *Natural History* 77: (August 1968), p. 57.

⁶Ibid; p. 62

⁷Robert Reinhold, "900 Adherants Paroli in Esperanto," *New York Times* 27:1 (August 5, 1972); p. 16.

⁸G.A. Connor, *Esperanto, the World Interlanguage*, 1948; p. 28.

⁹Mario Pei, *One Language for the World*, 1958, p. 162.

¹⁰M.P. Wilson "Viewpoint" *Library Journal* 94:1599 (April 15, 1969) p. 1599.

¹¹Mario Pei, *One Language for the World*, 1958; p. 245.

¹²Mario Pei, "Need for International Language for All", *Intellect* v. 101 (October 1972) p. 10.