

# Whither the International Auxiliary Language?

Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew

## **Abstract**

*For the first time in history, a world religion has promised that a day will come when there will be a universal auxiliary language taught to children in schools around the world. This article discusses the advantages of such a phenomenon and explores the reasons why this promise of an international auxiliary language is so vital for peace and harmony in the world. The author also considers two likely candidates—Esperanto and English—for the eventual choice as international auxiliary language and the linguistic as well as non-linguistic problems associated with each particular choice. The Bahá'í principle of justice with regard to the choice of a world auxiliary language is also taken into consideration.*

## **Résumé**

*Pour la première fois dans l'histoire, une religion mondiale a promis que, le jour viendrait où une langue auxiliaire universelle serait enseignée dans les écoles du monde entier. Cet article examine les avantages que présenterait ce phénomène et les raisons pour lesquelles cette promesse d'une langue auxiliaire internationale est si vitale pour la paix et l'harmonie dans le monde. L'auteur considère deux candidats possibles, l'esperanto et l'anglais, qui pourraient être choisis comme langue auxiliaire internationale et examine les problèmes linguistiques et non-linguistiques rattachés à chacun de ces choix. Il tient compte également du principe bahá'í de justice tel qu'il s'applique au choix d'une langue auxiliaire mondiale.*

## **Resumen**

*Por primera vez en la historia una religión mundial ha prometido que llegará el día en que, en todos los colegios del mundo se les enseñará a los niños un idioma universal complementario. Este artículo habla de las ventajas de tal fenómeno y las razones por lo cual la promesa de este idioma auxiliar internacional es tan vital para la paz y armonía en el mundo. También de a considerar dos posibilidades factibles—el Esperanto y el Inglés—para efectos de una subsiguiente selección de el idioma auxiliar internacional, y adicionalmente los problemas lingüísticos y no-lingüísticos particulares a cada uno. El principio bahá'í de justicia, en lo que atañe a la selección de un idioma complementario mundial, también se toma en consideración.*

The sixth *Ishráq* [Effulgence] is union and concord amongst the children of men. From the beginning of time the light of unity hath shed its divine radiance upon the world, and the greatest means for the promotion of that unity is for the peoples of the world to understand one another's writing and speech. In former Epistles We have enjoined upon the Trustees of the House of Justice either to choose one language from among those now existing or to adopt a new one, and in like manner to select a common script, both of which should be taught in all the schools of the world. Thus will the earth be regarded as one country and one home.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*

**T**he urge for an international language is not new. It has been expressed on countless previous occasions. The biblical account of the Tower of Babel is one such example. According to Genesis 11:4, the Babylonians wanted to make a name for themselves by building a mighty city and tower "with its top in the heavens." God disrupted the work by so confusing the language of the workers that they could no longer understand one another. The tower was never completed, and the people were dispersed over the face of the earth. Although this is an ancient attempt to explain the origin of the various languages of the world, it nevertheless could also symbolize humanity's longing for an international language.

The Bible also mentions a future age when the nations would be gathered together and this universal language would be a reality. Zephaniah mentions that during that day when "the earth shall be consumed" by the "anger" and "wrath" of God, God will change the "speech of the peoples to a *pure speech*, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord" (Zeph. 3:8–9) (*italics added*).

Such an international language would not only do away with all the linguistic difficulties encountered by technicians, scientists, missionaries, immigrants, businessmen, tourists, and students but would also place within the reach of all, without linguistic restriction, the world's science, political thought, and channels of trade. It would mean an end to the innumerable difficulties and delays that beset us as soon as we set foot beyond our borders. No longer will travellers and intercultural communicators need to learn foreign languages painfully at the adult stage or to rely on interpreters, translators, and guides. The urge for an international language is not unusual or new. What is unusual is that for the first time in history a world religion has explicitly promised that an international auxiliary language will no longer be a utopian dream; it will come to pass.

The third Glad-Tidings concerneth the study of divers languages. This decree hath formerly streamed forth from the Pen of the Most High: It behoveth the sovereigns of the world—may God assist them—or the ministers of the earth to take counsel together and to adopt one of the existing languages or a new one to be taught to children in schools throughout the world, and likewise one script. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets 22*)

The advantages of an international auxiliary language are immense and extremely important for world peace and unity. It is an acknowledged fact that language barriers can exacerbate national and racial antagonisms. In the Bahá'í context, an international auxiliary language will make the whole world one home and will become the strongest impulse for human advancement. It will upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity and will make the earth one universal commonwealth. The inefficiencies and insufficiencies of translations will be dispensed with, for we know that even the best translators have caused misunderstandings. For example, despite the huge bill to finance translation work at the United Nations, problems continue to surface. Once, there was considerable dither over a passage describing the threatened collapse of Western Europe as “brutal.” This was literal rendering of the French *brutal*, but the tension lessened when it was explained that in idiomatic usage the French word corresponded much more closely to the English *serious*. Where English-Russian translations are concerned, difficulties seem to crop up frequently. In connection with the West German rearmament, the Russian phrase *ne budyet miritsya* was at first translated “will not tolerate” and caused a flutter of excitement. A more exact and less warlike translation was soon found: “will not reconcile itself with” (Pei, *The Story*).

Problems of translation include words that are “untranslatable,” such as the German *Stimmung*, *Gemütlichkeit*, *Weltanschauung*, French words like *éclat* or *demi-tasse*, and English words like *pet* or the ubiquitous *get*.

Moreover, while translating and interpreting require a perfect command of two languages, most of us do not command even one language. Dictionaries are of little help because most words in one language have several possible translations in another. This means that to use a dictionary properly, we must first have a working command of the two languages.

Perhaps the best argument for an international language (besides the inefficiencies of translations) is the saving of precious time and effort that would have gone into learning other languages:

We have formerly ordained that people should converse in two languages, yet efforts must be made to reduce them to one, likewise the scripts of the world, that men's lives may not be dissipated and wasted in learning divers languages. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 68)

### Choosing a Language

Bearing in mind the great advantages accruing from an international language, the Bahá'í writings state in no uncertain terms that

it is incumbent upon all nations to appoint some men of understanding and erudition to convene a gathering and through joint consultation choose one language from among the varied existing languages, or create a new one, to be taught to the children in all the schools of the world. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 165–66)

However, this seemingly simple act of choosing one language from among the varied languages of the world is difficult because of the number and variety of languages that exist.<sup>1</sup> Discussions begun in an academic spirit often turn acrimonious or at best are transformed into panegyrics on the merits of the various languages, their extent, their phonetic beauty, their grammatical simplicity, their literary achievements, their commercial or political importance. Not only the world's "big" languages—English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese—present their own candidacy; even "smaller" languages like Finnish or Swedish are proposed.

Should we choose a language on the basis of ease of learning, we must remember that every language (however intricate it may seem to those who try to learn it as adults) is simple to its native speakers, who have learned it from childhood by natural speaking processes. It is clear then that if one wishes to acquire an international auxiliary language without going through the difficulties involved in the choice, one will have to devise an artificial language capable of serving all nations without restriction or exception.

The concept of such an artificial language is not a recent phenomenon. In 1629, Descartes set the artificial language machinery in motion when he outlined a scheme for a constructed language based on numbers that would represent words and notions. Within a few decades, half a dozen international language systems arose. Since that time, it is estimated that seven hundred attempts have been made to construct artificial tongues for international use (Large, *The Artificial* vii). But the best-known ones were those that came after Bahá'u'lláh's pronouncement on the need for an international language. Some of these were Volapuk (1880) from a German bishop named Johanin Martin Schleyer; Esperanto (1887) from a Polish physician named Ludwig Zamenhof; Interlingua (1903) from an Italian mathematician named Giuseppe Peano; Ido (1907) from the French logician Louis de Beaufront; and Novial (1928) from the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen.<sup>2</sup> Of these, the most successful was Esperanto,<sup>3</sup> a language that presented the advantage of extreme grammatical simplicity (sixteen basic rules of grammar and no verb irregularities) coupled with a fair degree of logic, utter ease of sounds, and absolute correspondence between the spoken and the written form. Its success from its very inception can be attributed to the fact that the languages before were preoccupied with logical perfectionism. Their inventors wanted a language that was completely logical and in accordance with what the scholars of those days viewed as universal. Zamenhof, however, swung to the other extreme and sought not logic but ease of learning.

---

1. There are 3,000 known languages in the world. The number varies according to what is counted as a language: dialects are not included in this number.

2. This is only a partial list since such attempts continue. Two recent attempts are Loglan invented by James Cooke Brown for use in exploring the relationship between language and thought, and Hans Preudenthal's Lincos, intended as a program for establishing communication with extraterrestrial intelligent beings should they be located.

3. It is of interest that Zamenhof's daughter Lydia became an active Bahá'í.

## The Case for Esperanto

The Esperantists claim that their tongue is the only living interlanguage, and their claim is substantiated by the fact that Esperanto has several million speakers scattered throughout the earth, as well as a flourishing literature, both original and in translation, which includes thousands of titles (including Christian, Muslim, and Bahá'í titles). In addition, Esperanto has gained a fair amount of official acceptance. Along with Latin, it is the only language that, by international agreement, must be accepted in telegrams throughout the world. In the People's Republic of China today, more than 100,000 students are learning Esperanto, beginning in elementary school and going through to university (Payne, "Language" 26). Moreover, as an artificial language, Esperanto is in no way opposed to the national languages of the world. On the contrary, it is known to create in those who learn it interest in language, and this very often leads to their learning one or more of the national languages (Payne, "Language" 26).

The Bahá'í Faith acknowledges the existence of Esperanto. Allusions to Esperanto are specific and encouraging. Both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi encouraged Bahá'ís to learn and to translate Bahá'í literature into Esperanto.<sup>4</sup> However, both always cautioned that they were not the protagonists of any one language to fill the post of international language.

Esperanto has been in wide use, more so than any similar language. all over the world, and the Bahá'ís have been encouraged by both the Master and the Guardian to learn it and to translate Bahá'í literature into it. We cannot be *sure* it will be the chosen language of the future; but as it is the one which has spread most, both East and West, we should certainly continue to cooperate with its members, learn to speak it, and translate Bahá'í literature into it. (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives* 35)

Bahá'u'lláh has often specified in his writings that such a language will either have to be chosen from one of the existing languages or an entirely new one created to serve as a medium of exchange among the nations of the world. Pending this final choice, the Bahá'ís are

advised to study Esperanto only in consideration of the fact that the learning of this language can considerably facilitate intercommunication between individuals, groups and Assemblies throughout the Bahá'í world in the present stage of the evolution of the Faith. (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives* 23)

It is, in fact, useless for the Bahá'ís to take sides on whether a natural language or artificial language be chosen. It makes no difference which type is selected, provided all people agree to use it, not primarily for themselves but for their descendants.

---

4. See for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 307.

However, one factor increasingly difficult to ignore is that Esperanto no longer draws as much universal optimism and acclaim as it did, although the enthusiasm of its adherents has not abated. Currently, academic circles consider artificial languages linguistic esoterica, mere symbols of the desire of universalist thinkers for a code of communication that would cut across culture.<sup>5</sup> No longer as supportive, academics argue that most constructed languages are not totally neutral or devoid of ethnocentricism for they show the cultural or linguistic influence of one or more natural languages. Esperanto, for instance, has a vocabulary based mainly on the Germanic, Greek, and Latin Romance elements of Indo-European languages. Eastern languages were overlooked in accordance with the nineteenth-century point of view. This means that Esperanto as it stands is much more easily assimilated by a Westerner rather than by an Easterner.

### The Case for English

Parallel with the decline in universal optimism concerning the use of artificial languages for world communication has been the rather sudden spread of the English language throughout the world. The spread of one language in relation to others is neither an unusual nor a strictly recent phenomenon. In 2000 B.C. for example, Akkadian replaced Sumarian, although the speech community retained the latter language in certain learned use. Also, it is a familiar phenomenon for one language to serve as *lingua franca* or language of special function (religious, commercial) over a large area of many languages, for example, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and French. What is unusual, however, is that never before has a single language spread for such purposes over most of the world as English has done in this century. In the last hundred years or so, English has attained a status that other natural languages such as French, Spanish, and Arabic have never matched and to which status the most successful artificial language could scarcely be imagined even to aspire. So widespread has its use become that English is less and less regarded as a European language and its development less and less determined by the usage of its native speakers. In its various forms and functions, English is used by over 700 million people on the four continents of the world. Fifty-seven percent of these are non-native speakers, and the percentage is increasing. The existence of more non-native speakers than native-speakers of a language is an unprecedented linguistic phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> The achievements of the English language have only been noticed in the last two decades. It has not happened by design.

Another pertinent point to note is that as more and more countries use English to communicate with the rest of the world, English is being used less

---

5. Some of the more notable academics who consider artificial languages' linguistic esoterica include Braj B. Kachru, *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*; John Pride (ed.), *New Englishes*; J. Fishman et al., *The Spread of English: The Sociology of English as an Additional Language*; and Larry E. Smith (ed.), *Readings in English as an International Language*. These academics believe that a natural language, notably English, will hold sway.

6. *The Atlas of Mankind*; Braj B. Kachru, *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*.

frequently as a national language because of the desire to reaffirm indigenous cultural identities. The message seems to be that “English is not one of our national languages, but it is our international language” (Harrison, “Why” 3–7).

This message ties in with the Bahá’í concept of two languages—one the mother tongue and the other the international auxiliary language. Wisdom is apparent in the two-languages concept, as it eliminates the threat and allays fears that the international language will replace the existing tongues and eventually obliterate them.

The English language is also well represented in the Bahá’í community. Meetings of the Universal House of Justice are conducted in English. One of the languages spoken by Shoghi Effendi was English, and although he was also literate and proficient in Persian, Arabic, and French, he chose to write most of his major letters in English. Two main Bahá’í texts (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* and *Nabil’s Narrative*) were translated into English by Shoghi Effendi. Shoghi Effendi’s only book (*God Passes By*) was conceived and written in English. Today, when Counsellors from different races and continents meet, they must use a *lingua franca*, and that most often is English.

Linguistically while the English language has distinct structural advantages in terms of its large vocabulary of adopted words giving it an international character, its incredible wealth of verb tenses, and a grammar based on word order and prepositions instead of inflection, English also has a number of linguistic disadvantages that make it a difficult language to learn. Chief disadvantages are its arbitrary spelling and pronunciation that make even the native speaker sometimes cry out in frustration. The lack of one-to-one correspondence between spelling and pronunciation in English is a problem for every learner of the language. Other defects of the English language are its uncertain syllabification and unpredictable stress. Most important of all, it is a language riddled with associations of colonialism and for many today, a language associated with economic, technical, and power imperialism. In many areas of the world, especially in the Third World, English is a symbol of class superiority and discrimination.

### A Question of Justice

If English is to be the eventual choice as the world’s universal auxiliary language, one must consider at this point the question of justice.

They that are just and fair-minded in their judgement occupy a sublime station and hold an exalted rank. The light of piety and uprightness shineth resplendent from these souls. We earnestly hope that the peoples and countries of the world may not be deprived of the splendours of these two luminaries. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 37)

It must be remembered that despite the widespread use of the English language, there are still many millions who have never used it or even heard it being used, and a notorious number who have tried to learn it but failed to master its rudiments. The adoption of English, a natural language, would mean that

those whose mother tongue was English and those who had opportunities to learn or use it because they were residing in former colonies of English-speaking countries would have a clear political, economic, social, and academic advantage. How then would the choice of English as the international auxiliary language tie in with the Bahá'í concept that "the foundation of the Kingdom of God is laid upon justice, fairness, mercy, sympathy and kindness to every soul" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Bahá'í World Faith* 412)?

How is unity possible if justice and equity are not present or if favoritism for the language of the foremost imperialist power in recent times be apparent in the choice of an international auxiliary language? Two scenarios are possible. One is that by the time nations meet to deliberate on the choice of the international auxiliary language, English would no longer remain as a predominantly utilitarian language of science and technology (in which case any language can serve this purpose) but instead would have grown and become so widespread in terms of its breadth of use and the number of its users that those who use it—native and non-native—feel it is their own possession, with its own range of uses, its own body of users, its own set of linguistic features. In this scenario, English would not have aspired to political or social predominance over the indigenous languages in countries of its adoption, nor would it have become greatly unpopular and totally unacceptable to its new users. In such an environment, a non-native speaker of English could code-switch voluntarily and unconsciously from native tongue to English because that language has become a part of the speaker's culture. This phenomenon of the "new Englishes"—non-native Englishes that are linguistically identifiable, geographically definable, and functionally valuable—can currently be observed, for example, in South Asia, parts of Africa such as Kenya and Nigeria, Southeast Asia, and the West Indies.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the development of English literature with areal modifiers, such as West African English literature, Caribbean English literature, Singaporean English literature, bear witness to the linguistic and contextual nativization of the English language. The fear that these nativized or indigenized varieties of English will be internationally unintelligible is unfounded due to accelerating improvements in mass transportation and the mass media, which will bring increasing numbers of people together and even out greatly differing accents. Suffice it to say, only when the English language of the future is accepted from within rather than felt as something imposed from outside, will its universal adoption coincide with the Bahá'í concept of justice.

However, and this is the second scenario, if English does not continue to spread and become contextualized to its place of adoption, then Esperanto as a planned language will be the most realistic candidate for a global role. Although at present Esperanto is rather limited and possesses certain linguistic disadvantages, chief of which is its bias toward the vocabulary of Western languages, its character is open to fundamental change and reform. Dr. Zamenhof, humble and

---

7. The development of such varieties is not unique to English; to a lesser degree, Hindi, Persian, French, and Spanish have also developed such transplanted varieties.

generous as he was, often expressed his hope that the language would evolve and accept new words of all cultures of the world within the framework of the “fundamento” or foundation of Esperanto. This was and is a recipe for linguistic evolution of a planetary language. From the standpoint of equality, origin, and social purpose, the adoption of Esperanto would be more in harmony with the Bahá’í concept of justice since it favors no one natural language and has no association with oppression and tyranny.

Whether the eventual choice of the world’s international language be Esperanto or English, it will have to be chosen without acrimonious debate if justice is to prevail without “the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 67). Only when there is harmonious agreement on the choice of the international language can there be the appearance of unity among peoples. It seems likely that circumstances will be such that when the time comes for the formal choice of an international language, it will be clearly obvious which language should be chosen. We are, in fact, on the verge of this time.

The day is approaching when all the peoples of the world will have adopted one universal language and one common script. When this is achieved, to whatsoever city a man may journey, it shall be as if he were entering his own home. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 249–50)

This is by no means an overly optimistic view, considering that all factors (economic, social, political, ecological) point to the imminent and inevitable unity of the world. While, the “unity of language” according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the seventh and last candle of unity, coming after the “unity of race” (the sixth candle) and the unity of nations (the fifth candle), we know the unity of nations or the fifth candle will be securely established before the end of the century (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 32). Once this unity comes about, a kind of world superstate would be formed. This superstate would logically turn to its most important agenda, that is, to look into means of permanently unifying the nations and the races so as to ensure its own survival as the supreme world entity. The superstate would speedily summon a great and erudite committee from all over the world and from all walks of life to consult on the choice of a world language. Whatever the choice may be, it is important that the language selected must, as Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cautioned, be adopted by international agreement in all countries at the same time and taught in the first year of elementary school, side by side with the national tongue, so that it may be learned easily, naturally, and painlessly by successive generations. Once the world language is accepted or newly formulated by the unchallengeable authority of the world superstate, all important books as well as religious scripture will be translated into this language.

When these things have come to pass, the possibilities are immense. Within ten years, a new generation of interlinguists will have grown; within twenty, the language will have matured; within thirty or forty years, the language will take the helm of world affairs; and within fifty or sixty years, the person not

equipped with the international auxiliary language will be as rare as the illiterate is in the developed countries of the world today. If this changeover proceeds (and we know it must), there will come a time when people the world over will know no other tongue. Then would, as Bahá'u'lláh commands in the *Lawḥ-i-Maṣṣúd*, "the divers languages be reduced to one language and . . . the scripts . . . to a single script" (*Tablets* 165). The *international auxiliary language* would become the *international language*. All other languages would have become archaic (much as Latin is today), redundant, extinct, or of interest only to linguists.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, one is reminded by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the essential function of language is

to portray the mysteries and secrets of human hearts. The heart is like a box, and language is the key. Only by using the key, can we open the box and observe the gems it contains. (*Promulgation* 60)

Where world peace and unity are concerned, the question of an international auxiliary language is of the utmost importance. It will be the most dynamic factor in human history—the final stage in the unification of the whole of humanity.

### Works Cited

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Comp. Howard MacNutt. 2d ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- . *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Comp. Research Department. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978.
- Atlas of Mankind, The*. Chicago: M. Beazley and Rand McNally, 1982.
- Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Rev. ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976.
- . *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978.
- Bible, The*. Revised Standard Version. Rev. ed. London: Collins Fontana Books, 1952.

---

8. Languages like Arabic and Persian may be of greater interest to scholars and the general populace since these are the languages of the Bahá'í revelation.

- Fishman, J. et al. *The Spread of English: The Sociology of English as an Additional Language*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1977.
- Harrison, S. S. "Why Don't They Speak Our Language in Asia?" *Asia* (March-April 1979).
- Kachru, Braj B. *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
- Large, Andrew. *The Artificial Language Movement*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
- Payne, Vera. "Language: Saying it for Esperanto." *Asia* (October 7, 1984): 26.
- Pei, Mario. *The Story of the English Language*. Winchester, MA: George Allen and Unwin, 1968.
- Pride, John, ed. *New Englishes*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1982.
- Shoghi Effendi. *Directives from the Guardian*. Comp. Gertrude Garrida. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973.
- Smith Larry E., ed. *Readings in English as an International Language*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982.