The Quest for a Universal Language throughout Human History

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Abstract

The article examines the age-old search of humankind for a universal language, which would make it possible to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers. The authors a) state the importance of the problem, b) analyze how the perspective on the language of common communication changed over time, and c) discuss the reasons for the failures in constructing a global lingua franca on the basis of an artificial language. A conclusion is made that artificial languages have failed as means of overcoming language and cultural barriers because they find it very difficult to answer the challenges of the changing world in all spheres of life due to the absence of any ethnocultural ties. The authors point out the topicality of this area as a subject for academic study.

Keywords: universal language; global English; the global lingua franca; artificial languages

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the English language transformation into the global language arouses an intense academic interest in the theory and practice of the generally accepted language of worldwide communication (Smokotin, Petrova, 2014). At the turn of the 20th century, the world system of languages underwent a sea change: English acquired the status of the global language. The transformation of English from one of a group of international languages used as regional lingua francas into the language of global communication and the emergence on its basis of the Global Lingua Franca has no precedent in the world history of languages. The question about the universal language which would allow humankind to return to the Golden Age of human communication before the confusion of tongues at Babel is not new and has been repeatedly raised by the greatest minds of humanity at critical periods of
human history. The formulation of the question has been changing from the utopian idea of creating an ideal universal language that could replace “imperfect” languages spontaneously emerging in people’s masses and that could make human speech maximally logical and precise to creating concrete projects of artificial auxiliary languages, not with the aim of replacing national languages but for exclusive use in international contacts with the goal of overcoming language barriers and achieving rapprochement of cultures and countries.

In this paper we investigate the following questions:

1. How did the perspective on a universal language of humanity change over time since the first language projects of the periods of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment?

2. Why have artificial or constructed languages failed to become languages of worldwide communication and, eventually, achieve the status of a global language?

2. The evolution of the universal language concept from the notion of the “perfect language”

2.1. The first universal language projects in the period of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment

The first attempts at creating artificial or constructed languages for international communication took place in the periods of the Renaissance and, particularly, the Enlightenment, when the positions of Latin as the language of upper classes and the educated circles of Europe weakened, and the emerging plurality of languages threatened to divide educated Europeans into separate groups depending on national languages, which were at various stages of emergence and development. From the point of view of dividing constructed languages into a priori languages and posteriori languages, i.e. languages whose grammar and word stock are created by the authors themselves unlike languages developed on the basis of natural languages, the first universal languages that were called philosophical by their inventors were fully a priori constructions. The authors of philosophical languages projects worked at constructing “perfect languages” on the basis of the fundamental categories of philosophical knowledge. They aimed to achieve rationalizing thought by removing arbitrariness of word forms relative to meanings of words and to ensure the communication of the educated elite in languages free from inaccuracies typical for natural languages due to the absence of correspondence between word form and content. International communication in Middle Ages and in the periods of Renaissance and Enlightenment was a privilege of the upper classes and academic community, and, therefore, the inventors of constructed languages did not set an aim of developing a global language of universal communication for overcoming language barriers standing in the way of international contacts.

Most of the “philosophical languages” of the Renaissance were pasigraphies, that is they had no oral form and were intended for composing texts understandable to speakers of any languages without translation but could not be used for a direct exchange of ideas in spoken communication, which reflects the limitations of the international contacts at those times, when the language of international communication, Latin, was used mainly in written and printed forms. Attempts to construct a perfect pasigraphy, for which a phonetic form could be developed later, continued for a few centuries and led, according to Arika Okrent, to the invention of over 500 universal written languages (Okrent, 2010). The quest for a “perfect language” in those historical periods did not lead to the realization of any of the projects but the method of presenting human knowledge in the form of certain hierarchies proved fruitful as it had brought about the publication of the “Encyclopédie” in the second half of the 18th century by the encyclopédistes headed by Denis Diderot, in which human knowledge was presented in the form of a “figurative system” with three main branches: Memory, Reason and Imagination (Adams, 2006).

With the growth of international contacts in the course of establishing capitalist relations in the 19th century, the division of the world into monolingual nation states, in which foreign language skills were the privilege of upper classes, became an obstacle for further development. During the 19th century, the search for a universal language brought about the development of scores of language projects, which, unlike the philosophical languages of the past epochs, were proposed as languages for communication of all those interested in establishment and support of international connections. Leopold Leau and Louis Couturat in their “Histoire de la Langue Universelle” described 38 projects advanced in the 19th century, starting with Solresol, a musical language invented by François Sudre in 1827. Instead of sounds, which are different in different natural languages, Solresol was based on 7 musical notes that have invariable and universal forms in all languages of the world. The notes in Solresol could be used in 7 different ways, including writing down their international names or musical signs, singing or playing a musical
instrument or presentation with the seven colors of the rainbow (with the use of flags, signal lamps and rockets, signing with fingers as in sign languages for the deaf and hard of hearing, etc. (Leau and Couturat, 1903, p. 32). Solresol aimed to make possible not only communication of people across language barriers but, depending on the way of transferring signals, across barriers separating people with impaired hearing or vision from the rest of society (ibid., p. 33). Despite numerous enthusiastic responses of the educated circles of Europe throughout the period of the author’s work at realizing his idea, the project has never been realized due to the complexity of remembering all the classes and subclasses as well as rules for creating new words typical for all a priori languages. Therefore, as soon as the first projects of a posteriori universal languages emerged that could be used in practice and not only for demonstration before learned societies, the Solresol clubs ceased to exist and the “musical language” was committed to history, having failed to reach its aim to help humankind in overcoming language barriers.

2.2. The rise and decline of artificial languages as means of international communication

The first “universal language” that, unlike all the preceding constructed languages, could be realized in practice was Volapük, created in the period of 1879-1880 by Johann Martin Schleyer, a German Catholic priest. Schleyer was inspired by the idea of uniting humankind, and the motto of the proposed language was: “Universalsprache für alle Erdbewohner” (ibid., p. 128). As opposed to national languages “with all the serious defects and numberless difficulties”, Schleyer proposed a “universal grammar”, which he considered “absolutely right and rational” (ibid., p.129). As a source of word stock for the new language Schleyer relied on English but the word forms were changed so as to exclude the association of Volapük with any national language. The popularity of Volapük led to the formation of a movement which at its peak in 1888-89 had a following approaching one million people.

But, the peak of Volapük’s popularity was followed by a schism among its followers over the proposed reform of the language to make it easier to learn, which led to its steady decline. The decline of Volapük coincided with the emergence of Esperanto, which soon took over as the world’s most successful constructed language. The inventor of the new constructed language, Dr. L.L. Zamenhof, explained in the Foreword to his first book published in Warsaw in 1887 that the advantages of the introduction of a single, universally recognized international language for the future development of humankind would be, apart from mutual understanding between people speaking different languages, advancement of science and commerce. In emphasizing the “immense importance” of adopting “an international idiom”, he claimed that “no sacrifice would be too great, if by it we could obtain a universal tongue” (Zamenhof, 1887). The main criterion in creating Esperanto in order to ensure the ease of learning the language and make it accessible to broad masses of people around the world was extreme simplicity of its grammar and word formation, which, as Zamenhof wrote, made it possible to acquire “this rich, mellifluous, universally comprehensible language” not as a matter of “years of laborious study, but the mere light amusement of a few days” (Ibid).

By the turn of the 19th century, Esperantism, a powerful movement promoting the widespread use of Esperanto, transcended the boarders of the Russian Empire, owing its success to the Zeitgeist of the time period, when the interest in a universal language was spurred by the anticipation of a new era of unprecedented growth in international contacts. The first Esperanto Congress held in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1905 gathered 688 delegates from 20 countries of the world and attracted a great deal of attention of the world’s media. The Declaration of Boulogne adopted by the Congress defined Esperantism as “the endeavor to spread throughout the entire world the use of this neutral human language which, … in no way trying to replace existing national languages, would give to people of different nations the ability to understand each other, and would be able to serve as a conciliatory language of public institutions” (Boulogne Declaration. URL: http://aktuale.info>aktuale.infoII/Library/Documents/BoulogneDeclaration). The Declaration claimed that, unlike all the previous language projects, Esperanto “appears effectively complete, thoroughly tested and perfectly viable and most suitable in all relations”, and they called all Esperantists to rally around the language and to disseminate it around the world (Ibid.).

In early 20th century, the enthusiasm of the Esperantist community and the optimism of the partisans of the international language about the forthcoming realization of the “thousand-year dream” of a universal language which would put an end to mistrust and enmity among nations and peoples were shared by many contemporaries. New projects of artificial languages were proposed, numerous clubs and associations, particularly in Europe and
North America, were engaged in discussing problems connected with developing dictionaries and grammars of new languages, advantages and shortcomings of certain language projects as well as ways and means of popularizing international languages and widening the spheres of their use. Couturat and Leau, reflecting on the spirit of the time, wrote in conclusion of their work: “In any case, the idea of a universal language,… judging by the accelerating progress, will reach its definitive realization in twenty years… The final acceptance of a universal language will be a triumph and recognition of a multitude of endeavors which have seemed fruitless” (Leau and Couturat, 1903, p.568). However, as the disappointing realities of the artificial language projects development in the course of the 20th century fell short of the great expectations of the universal language quest enthusiasts, the following question should be addressed: why had not a single universal language project reached its aim when the need for a single common language arose at the turn of the 20th century, and one of the most widespread natural languages, English, became a generally accepted means of international communication? To answer this question, it should be noted that for a universal project to be realized it must receive overwhelming support in worldwide intergovernmental organizations leading to necessary changes in international law. The most persistent work in spreading the use of their international auxiliary language and seeking to achieve recognition in international law has been carried out by the Esperanto movement directed by the World Esperanto Association (UEA), founded in 1908 by the Swiss journalist Hector Hodler and others. During the 20th century, the Esperanto movement achieved certain successes in advancing the cause of Esperanto in spite of two world wars, persecutions and bans by authoritarian regimes. In the 1920s, the hopes of Esperantists for getting the support of the first supranational body in human history, the League of Nations, seemed to be coming true as the question of raising Esperanto to the status of international language was put on the agenda of the organization by a group of delegates headed by Lord Robert Cecil. Their resolution proposed that, in order to find a remedy for overcoming linguistic difficulties in direct relations between the peoples, the League of Nations charge the Secretariat to prepare a report on the possibilities of teaching Esperanto in state schools of the member countries (Foster Common Language. League of Nations Considers Adoption of Esperanto. The New York Times. October 16, 1921).

Despite a determined opposition put up by the French delegation, which regarded Esperanto as a threat to the status of French as an international language of diplomacy (Forster, 1982, p.171-176), the Secretariat studied the question of introducing the international language in education for about two years and finally presented its Report to the Third Assembly of the League in 1922. The Report presented in a positive way the results of the spread of Esperanto in the world and concluded: “Language is a great force and the League of Nations has every reason to watch with particular interest the progress of the Esperanto movement, which, should it become more widespread may one day lead to the great results from the point of view of the moral unity of the world” (Report of the General Secretariat of the League of Nations adopted by the Third Assembly, 1922 “Esperanto as an International Auxiliary Language”. URL:http://archive.org/.../esperantoasinter00leaegerich/esperantaosint...). Due to the pressure of the French delegation, the Report was accepted without the section approving teaching Esperanto in schools. The question of teaching Esperanto was further considered at the meetings of the Committee on intellectual cooperation in late July - early August 1923 but the final Resolution did not recommend an artificial language for consideration by the League of Nations, recommending instead that the League promote the study of modern languages and foreign literature (Forster, 1982, p.175-177).

The opposition to Esperanto in the League of Nations was not limited to the French delegation. As Robert Phillipson pointed out in his work on international languages and linguistic rights, “The existing world order might have been threatened not only by a neutral language but also by the pacifist utopian political beliefs embraced by some Esperantists” (Phillipson, 2002).

Following World War II, the World Association of Esperanto (UEA) resumed its efforts to achieve the recognition of Esperanto as the world language at all levels, seeking not only for support of individual governments and NGOs, but also in the United Nations. In the early 1950s, it conducted a worldwide campaign of collecting signatures for an international petition to the UN in favor of Esperanto. The petition was submitted by the UEA to the Secretary General of the UN on August 2, 1950 and forwarded by him to the UNESCO on August 8, 1950. The petition had received a worldwide support, with 875, 432 individual signatures and 434 signatures of representatives from NGOs with more than 15 million registered members. The petition requested the UN “to help to spread the use of [Esperanto] in every possible way; for example, by encouraging its teaching at schools....and developing its use in travel, international commerce and correspondence” (Report on the International Petition in favor of Esperanto.
UNESCO, General Conference, 8th Session, Programme and Budget Commission. SC/PRG//3. Paris, 1 June, 1954). The text of the petition was communicated to member states by the Acting Director General on February 9, 1953 with a request for views or observations. The replies received from member states were discouraging: out of 45 responders only 10 were in favor of the petition, 19 were against for various reasons, while others did not express any opinion. As a result, the Director General made no provision for any special activities connected with Esperanto in the Draft Programs for 1955 and 1956, and no resolution was adopted on the subject (Ibid.). The Montevideo Resolution itself, due to numerous objections, did not contain any recommendations concerning the introduction of teaching Esperanto in schools of the member states, and limited itself to requesting the member states that experimented with the introduction of Esperanto into their educational systems to “keep the Director General informed of the results obtained in this field” as well as authorized the Director General to “follow current developments in the use of Esperanto in education, science and culture” by means of cooperating with the UEA (E-Euroscola / Resolutions of UNESCO for Esperanto. URL:http://e.euroscola.free.fr/…).

Another attempt by the partisans of Esperanto to get the UNESCO adopt a resolution in support of Esperanto as the “international auxiliary language” was undertaken in 1985, on the threshold of the 100th anniversary of the publication of the first book on Esperanto by Dr. Zamenhof. The resolution adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 23rd Session in Sophia (Bulgaria) recognized “the great potential of Esperanto for international understanding and communication among peoples of different nationalities”, invited the member states to “promote the introduction of a study programme on the language problem and Esperanto in their schools and higher educational institutions” and recommended “that international non-government organizations …consider the possibility of the use of Esperanto as a means for the spreading of all kinds of information among their members” (Ibid.).

The UNESCO resolutions of 1954 and 1985, while recognizing the efforts made by the Esperanto community to develop Esperanto “as a means for better understanding among different nations and cultures”, stopped short at giving any recommendations for universal introduction of the compulsory teaching of Esperanto in the educational systems of member states. Moreover, if we compare the UNESCO resolutions of 1954 and 1985 in support of Esperanto and the Report of the League of Nations General Secretariat to the Third Assembly, we will see a change of attitude towards an artificial language as a universal international language: the report that was unanimously approved by the League of Nation’s Assembly expressed confidence that Esperanto would become a universal language, and that teaching of Esperanto in all the schools of the world was only a question of time. In the UNESCO resolutions, Esperanto is regarded as a movement whose activities correspond with the goals and ideals of the UNESCO, and not as a language of universal communication, compulsory in education and used in practices of international relations.

The failure of Esperanto, or any other artificial or constructed language, to deliver on its promise to become a universal language does not mean that nowadays, when due to globalization processes interlingual and intercultural contacts are rapidly growing, international communication will be impeded. Economic, political and cultural factors have propelled the most widespread international language, English, to the level of the global lingua franca (Smokotin, Petrova, 2014).

3. Discussion

The apparent futility of the search for a universal language of world-wide communication through conceiving and carrying projects of artificial or constructed languages poses a number of questions for discussion. Declining interest in artificial languages designed for international communication, including Esperanto, in the period of rapid globalization, despite the heightened demand for linguistic and cultural competencies due to unprecedented growth of international contacts can be explained by a wide spread of English, which started yet in the 19th century, and by the turn of the 20th century turned it into the means of global communication ( Gural, Smokotin 2013, 2014). Now that the quest of humanity for a universal language is over, the question that needs to be answered is: how could a natural language assume the role of the language of the world instead of a constructed language, especially created as an easy-to-learn, politically neutral, culturally independent language like Esperanto? As experience of interethnic and interlingual communication shows, natural languages have been used throughout history for breaking down
language and cultural barriers in multilingual societies and regions. When the quest for the universal language began, the major motive was a search for a perfect language, since according to conventional wisdom of the time, natural languages as products of the masses were imperfect, full of ambiguities and inexactitudes, leading to miscomprehension in communication (Eco, 1995). When the quest for a universal language reached its peak of popularity in the 19th-early 20th centuries, natural languages were not even considered as generally accepted means of common communication due to the current nationalism of the nation-states, which viewed any other language and culture as a threat to their own national identity. The main appeal of Esperanto, expressed already in the Boulogne Declaration issued at the First Esperanto Congress in 1905, was its neutrality. It was emphasized right at the start that Esperanto did not aim to replace natural languages, and that it would not undermine world cultures.

As English reached the status of the global language, the proponents of Esperanto accused it of “international linguistic hegemony” and linguicism (Phillipson, 2002). The authors of the Draft Resolution on Esperanto at the 31st Session of the General Conference of UNESCO contrasted Esperanto to English by noting that, unlike dominant languages “Esperanto allows individuals and peoples to understand each other better without language hegemony, and that in this way it makes an important contribution to the conservation and propagation of minority and indigenous cultures and languages”.

When analyzing the reasons for the failure of Esperanto to achieve the aim set at the first Esperanto congress of becoming the international auxiliary language despite the broad Esperanto movement with annual congresses gathering thousands of delegates from Esperanto clubs and associations and highly publicized activities aimed at demonstrating its effectiveness as a means of communication, it becomes obvious that the World Association of Esperanto (UEA) has failed to make a convincing case for the feasibility of Esperanto to take on all the challenges of interlingual and intercultural exchange in the globalized world. Esperanto may have inspired a broad intellectual movement, but as a tool of communication on the global scale it has proved ineffectual and impractical. Robert Patterson and Stanley Huff, drawing on the experience of the “decline and fall of Esperanto”, as a perfect but impractical language, for standards committees in the informatics community, warned that something that is presumed to be “superior but difficult-to-implement” will not replace “functional strategies that build on existing systems” (Patterson and Huff, 1999). But are constructed languages really perfect for communication as compared to natural languages, and is English as the global language culturally non-neutral, posing a threat to ethnocultural identities? This question needs further investigation in connection with the critical perspective on the use of natural languages for international communication taken by some members of academic community (Phillipson, 2002).

4. Conclusion

In this article we have sought to trace the age-long search for a universal language as well as to answer the question about the failure of artificial languages to become means of overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers and filling the need for a global lingua franca in the period of globalization. Numerous language projects proceeded from the assumptions of the imperfection of natural languages as products of the masses. Another reason for the perceived inability of natural languages to achieve the status of a universal language was their strong ties with the respective ethnic or national languages, which would be a formidable barrier in making them acceptable as languages of common communication. However, what was regarded as their weaknesses, proved to be their strong points: natural languages derive their strength from the power base of the ethnic groups and nations that use them, which allows them to become powerful communication tools. Artificial languages, deprived of any ethnocultural ties, find it very difficult to answer the challenges of the changing world in all spheres of life. Not less important is the fact that artificial languages lack the political support to ensure changes in international law so as to be incorporated into national educational systems with a view of turning them into means of global communication.

As a final conclusion, it may be said that the failure of artificial languages to fill the need for a global language in the period of globalization should not be regarded as a proof that they are incapable of achieving a global status, provided that certain conditions are met. Thus, research into the phenomenon of the global language should not be limited to natural languages, particularly English, but include artificial or constructed languages into its study area.
References


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