

Time to Implement a Neglected Revolutionary Idea

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One of the first measures to be introduced into the Assembly of the League of Nations in December 1920 was the proposal of Lord Robert Cecil, delegate of South Africa, that in order to deal with “the language difficulties which prevent direct relations between the peoples” it is to be hoped that “the instruction of the international language Esperanto” “will become general in the whole world, in order that children of all nations from now on would know at least two languages, their mother tongue and an easy means of international communication.” [Peter G. Forster, The Esperanto Movement, The Hague: Mouton, 1982, page 172]

The world now is greatly different from what it was in 1920. One of the major changes has been from an internationalism whose image of the world was a globe with many nations of different colors to a globalism inspired by photos of Earth from space as well as faster means of transportation and communication. We humans have transitioned from an inter-national world to a planetary community.

An important and too much neglected issue is what we should do in the way of language education for our children. Should each of them learn not only two languages but many languages? Should there be a plan for all of them to learn at least one common language; and if so, which language should it be? Should it be some national language such as English, or should it be a nationality-neutral, designed, easier-to-learn language such as Esperanto?

I maintain that it is desirable for our children to learn several languages but that nevertheless there should be a plan for all of them to learn one common language so that every Earthling would be able to communicate directly with every other Earthling. As a native speaker of English, I believe that English is not a good choice for the common language of planet Earth. To adopt any national language is unfair to all those children who have a different native language, and in the case of English that is 95% of them.

Despite my own wonderful experiences as an Esperantist, I am conscious that Esperanto is basically a European language and thus may need some minor modifications to better serve as the common world language. Esperanto has many features worth preserving, however, such as being completely phonetic and totally rule-guided with an ingenious system of affixes which greatly facilitates the quick acquisition of a large vocabulary. It has also been inspired by the ideal of the single human family.

I propose that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) appoint a commission to develop a nationality-neutral, easily learnable common world language so that we can begin to implement the wonderful ideal considered by the League of Nations almost a hundred years ago. Can anything be more important for the future of education?

1. The missed opportunity

One of the first measures introduced into the Assembly of the League of Nations in December 1920 was the proposal of Lord Robert Cecil that in order to deal with “the language difficulties which prevent direct relations between the peoples” it is to be hoped that “the instruction of the international language Esperanto” “will become general in the whole world, in order that children of all nations from now on would know at least two languages, their mother tongue and an easy means of international communication.” [1]

Unfortunately that revolutionary idea wasn't implemented. In the Assembly of the League of Nations any proposal could be adopted only if every member nation approved of it. One country opposed Lord Cecil's proposal. Which country? France. Why? Because the proposal indicated that Esperanto would be the world language to be taught, and the French claimed that French already was the world language. [2]

2. Beyond inter-nationalism to globalism

The French argued that Esperanto lacked a national culture. That argument, however, assumes the inter-nationalist outlook of the 20th century instead of 21st century globalism. Inter-nationalism views the world as a collection of nation-states whose members are basically confined to their own countries and who interact with each other through international organizations. The image for inter-nationalism is a world map with the various nation-states displayed in various colors. The global community of the 21st century is different. Its image is based on photos of Earth from space. All humans are members of one planetary community. Thus we should be able to communicate directly with each other.

When dealing with education, we must consider the world of the future. An important issue is what we should do with regard to language education for children. We need a plan for all of them to learn at least one common language so that all of them in this planetary community can communicate with all the others, not just those who happen to live in certain countries.

3. The language education issue before us

What should we be doing in the way of language education for our children? Should each of them learn not only two languages but many languages? Should they learn at least one common language? If so, which language should it be? Should we try to use as the global language some national language such as English or Chinese? Or should we select as the global language which all children would learn a nationality-neutral, designed, easier-to-learn language such as Esperanto?

Even though English is my native language, I want to argue against the view that English should be the common world language to be taught to children. I believe that the rational and morally correct choice for a first foreign language for all children is Esperanto.

I am not maintaining that our goal should be that children should learn only two languages, their first language and the common world language. The aim should be that people learn many languages, but all children should learn at least the common world language so that they can communicate directly with all other Earthlings.

4. The moral dimension of the world language issue

I urge everyone to take seriously the moral dimension of this issue of which first foreign language should be taught to all children. I believe it is fundamentally immoral to choose any existing national language to function as the world language.

If any existing national language becomes the common world language, nations which use that language acquire a status above others. This struggle for top status is the kind of competition that resulted in two world wars and the Cold War. Such competitive inter-nationalism is something we need to end.

To use any national language as the common global language is also unfair to all those children whose first language is another language. As a native speaker of English, I am constantly reminded of the unfairness of the existing situation. Others must learn a new language, but I can use my native language. How unfair! Furthermore, I am among the less than 5 percent of the world's people who use English as their first language.[3] Thus more than 95% of all people must learn a second language to be able to participate in international English-only conferences such as this one. Even if the world language were Mandarin Chinese, 88 percent of the world's people would have to learn it as a second language.[4]

If any national language is used as the common global language, countries which use that language will have an unjust economic advantage over others. Besides having the advantage of not needing to teach a second language to their children, they gain the economic advantage of having others come to their countries to learn their language. They also gain the economic advantage of not needing to use a second language on products which they sell.

5. The case against using English as the global language

Since all of the children of the world would need to learn the global language, this language should be relatively easy to learn. Since our aim is for children to learn many languages, they need to have a good

first experience that will encourage them to want to study other languages. The best possibility would be a phonetic language in which the written language and spoken language can be learned together.

English is not such a language. Written English and spoken English are so different that they must be learned separately. It is not logical that the words "so" (S-O) and "do" (D-O) which look so much alike should be pronounced differently. It isn't logical that the words spelled S-E-W and S-O-W should be pronounced the same as S-O. In English words spelled similarly are pronounced differently such as the words spelled T-H-O-U-G-H and T-H-O-U-G-H-T and T-H-R-O-U-G-H. English contains many oddities such as the addition of the letter S to verbs in the third person singular. Irregularities exist with regard to different tenses of the same verb, such as "go," "went," and "have gone." Note the irregular conjugation of the verb "to be." "I am," "you are," "he is" and then in the past tense "I was," "you were," and "he was," not to mention the fact that in these words the letter S is pronounced like Z. These illogical aspects of English may cause many children to just give up on trying to learn any foreign language.

6. The case for using Esperanto or a version of it as the global language

Instead we should use Esperanto. Those who have not learned Esperanto don't appreciate how ingenious it is and how easy to learn. Those who have not taught Esperanto do not realize how quickly children can learn it.[5] Esperanto has 28 letters. Each has one and only one sound. Each of five vowels always indicates a separate syllable, and in each multiple-syllable word the stress is always on the next-to-last syllable. One can easily determine how a word is pronounced and how it is spelled.

If children of the world learned a designed language like Esperanto, other advantages would follow. One is the preservation of minority languages which now perish when confronting languages supported by powerful national governments. If Esperanto were used, members of those communities could continue to use their languages within their own communities and Esperanto for global communication.

A second advantage of having children learn Esperanto as their first foreign language is that they would develop a positive attitude toward learning new languages. Experiments have shown that students who have learned Esperanto more quickly learn other European languages.[6]

A third advantage of having children learn Esperanto is that they would develop an identity as a member of the world community just as learning a national language leads them to develop an identity with that national community.[7] If all the children of the world learned the same global language, they would think of themselves as members of the global community and would be less inclined to fight in wars against other members of that community.

A fourth advantage of having children learn Esperanto is that they would be able to use modern technology to communicate directly with other children everywhere.[8] Personal friendships could be developed without being hindered by national borders and different national languages.

Esperanto was designed to serve as the rapidly learnable language for international communication in the inter-nationalistic 20th century. We should now make use of it as the global language in the 21st century.

7. Possible modifications to make Esperanto more culturally neutral

Esperanto may be considered a European language, and thus one could argue that it needs some modifications in order to serve as a culturally neutral global language. Might Esperanto be made more culturally neutral by incorporating terms from Asian and African languages? Nevertheless Esperanto in its present form has been enthusiastically supported by people throughout the world. The government of China has done as much as any national government to support the use of Esperanto.[9]

To deal with this issue, I propose that the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which adopted resolutions expressing support for Esperanto in 1954 and 1985, appoint a commission to develop a slightly modified, more culturally neutral version of Esperanto. This commission should be given a deadline of five years. Several experienced Esperantists should be on this commission including some from Asia and Africa. This commission should also have members who are familiar with Hanyu pinyin and Swahili and Bahasa Indonesian. If the commission failed to produce the desired modified culture-neutral version of Esperanto by the five-year deadline, the existing version of Esperanto

would be officially recommended by UNESCO as the common global language to be taught to all children everywhere.

8. Concluding Thoughts

Esperanto is one of the greatest inventions in human history. It is a great tragedy that it wasn't adopted as the world language in the inter-nationalist 20th century, and it is still not being given the support it deserves in the globalized 21st century. Can anything be more important for the future of education than a world-wide commitment to teach all children everywhere an easily-learned common global language?

[1] Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement*, page 172.

[2] Forster's *The Esperanto Movement* tells how Lord Robert Cecil's proposal got the discussion started as well as giving a detailed account of what happened subsequently with regard to Esperanto in the League of Nations and other international organizations. See chapter 6, pages 169-187.

[3] *The World Almanac and Book of Facts-2013*. On page 717 the reported number of persons using English as their first language is 328 million. On page 733 the reported world population is 7,017,543,964. Thus the proportion using English as their first language is 4.67436 percent.

[4] *The World Almanac and Book of Facts-2013*. On page 717 the reported number of persons using Mandarin Chinese as their first language is 845 million. On page 733 the reported world population is 7,017,543,964. Thus the proportion using Mandarin Chinese as their first language is 12.04218 percent.

[5] Alvino E. Fantini and Timothy G. Reagan, *Esperanto and Education: Towards a Research Agenda*. See especially pages 27-33.

[6] Helmar Frank, "Valeur propédeutique de la langue Internationale" ["Propadeutic Value of the International Language"], *Journée d'étude sur l'Esperanto*. University of Paris-Vincennes, Nov. 1983, pp. 121-136 and J. H. Haloran, "A four-year experiment in Esperanto as an introduction to French," *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 22, nr. 3, Nov. 1959, pp. 200-204..

[7] Kurt E. Müller, (ed.), *Language Status in the Post-Cold-War Era*. See especially pages 117-139.

[8] Humphrey Tonkin and Grahame Leon-Smith, *The Future of Modern Languages in English-speaking Countries*, (Esperanto Documents, New Series, 18). Rotterdam: Universal Esperanto Association, 1979, page 17.

[9] Ulrich Lins, "Esperanto as Language and Idea in China and Japan," *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 32:1 (2008), pp. 47-60 and "China Interreta Informa Centro: Historia de Esperanto" (Chinese Internet Information Center: History of Esperanto), <<http://esperanto.china.org.cn/world/shi-window/index5.htm>>.

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