AN IDEAL LANGUAGE OF WORLDWIDE COMMUNICATION?

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The modern world cannot do without a language capable to fulfill the function of a medium of the worldwide communication. Such a language is by definition a second language to most of its users and should meet some pragmatic and some structural criteria. Is it the case of English, at present the only language in this category? Why English?

From historical experience, we know that languages neither die out nor expand at the expense of other languages because of their purely structural deficiencies or advantages, and neither is their rich cultural heritage a factor of supreme importance. What decides are pragmatic considerations, economic and political circumstances, but a certain weight in this respect no doubt has the representative function of language that reflects the degree of national or ethnic consciousness. And thus Sumerian, the language of the most advanced people of the Middle East, gradually yielded to Akkadian spoken by nomadic East Semitic tribes just as the language of Etruscans disappeared although the Etruscans had been teachers of Latins at the dawn of Roman history. The same fate was decreed to the language of culturally advanced Mons in the East Indies which has been preserved only in small and scattered enclaves. Egyptian was destined to be replaced by Arabic after the 7th century A. D. The Greek language had lost all its positions in Anatolia in the 20s of the 20th century in favour of Turkish. Languages of international, or at least interethnic, communication arose usually in the environment of mobile, economically, militarily and politically efficient peoples which remained open to cultural influence and stimuli emanating from the more advanced neighbours.

The retreat of Latin in mediaeval Europe was no consequence of military expansions. After the fall of the Roman Empire a gradual restriction of the functional spectrum of Latin took place. Its classical variant still continued to be cultivated by scholars and clergy while the so-called vulgar Latin has given birth to a whole family of Romance languages. Old multiethnic Hungary (which included Slovakia) was probably the last European country in which Latin lost its secular (and especially administrative) functions. Old Hungary with its numerous and numerically strong ethnic communities— Magyars, Slovaks, Germans, Rumanians, Croats, Ruthenes—could until the early 19th century use Latin, the language that preferred none of these communities and the final decay of the Old Hungarian kingdom culminating in the Empire's collapse in 1918 was triggered by the ruthless efforts of Magyar nationalists to convert the old multiethnic

kingdom into an ethnic Magyar country–despite the fact that the Magyars never achieved the 50 % of the population.

The Renaissance in Europe was in the first place a renaissance of Ancient Greek and Roman culture, not a restoration of Latin. And thus, after many centuries, Latin ceased to fulfill the function of an international language in Europe.

Maybe the last important attempt to revitalize Latin in science was undertaken early in the 20th century by the Italian mathematician Giuseppe Peano, the author of Interlingua known also under the name of Latino sine flexione. In addition to Latin words, it comprises quite a few modern Romance elements, and in the forties and fifties of the 20th century Alexander Gode developed it into a language of the international research community. It is interesting to note that a handbook of Interlingua was in 1994 published in Slovak (Tomin 1994). Although Interlingua might have become a more useful auxiliary language than Zamenhof´s Esperanto, it was unable to gain an upper hand over it, even if it is still used in several science periodicals as a language of abstracts and summaries. Old European traditions might have favourized Interlingua, but it was largely extralinguistic circumstances that decided about the winner in the competition for the language of worldwide communication. The winner is, naturally, English. All earlier languages of international communication were strictly speaking of a regional character: Akkadian in the Ancient Middle East, Greek in the eastern Mediterranean (until the 7th century A. D.), Latin in the western Mediterranean and Europe, Arabic in the Islamic world, Sanskrit and later Pālī in India and Southeast Asia, Malay in the insular world between South Asia and Australia, and Quechua in the South-American Andes. Alongside these macro-regional languages we could list tens of languages successfully functioning upon a lower level. German is such a language in Central Europe, French in the Southwest of Europe, Russian throughout the former Soviet Union and last but not least Spanish between the United States in the north and Tierra del Fuego in the sub-Antarctic south. Spanish is today the first language for more people than English (more than 400 million) while the number of persons for whom the first language is English has been sinking lately. However, for the post of a language of worldwide communication it is its favourable distribution that plays a much greater importance. And today there is no such language in the world that could compete with English in this respect.

English is the first language in human history that gained the attribute of worldwide communication even if—as a phenomenon of the modern world—it would deserve to be called the global language or the language of globalization. The stimuli for the spread of English were originally to be found in the domain of the political and commercial ambitions of England. However, achievements in the fields of education, science, technology and way of life were added to the original stimuli, especially thanks to the United States.

And yet, an ideal language of worldwide communication ought to meet certain demands of a linguistic nature even if this is not of overriding importance and we shall soon return to them.

Finding a language notable both for a great number of its speakers and for its solid cultural background as well as for its political prestige is a very exacting requirement, especially if it were used only within its ethnic borders. Perhaps the most suitable example of such a language is Chinese, one of very few languages notable for their

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uninterrupted (both oral and written) tradition since the 2nd millennium BC until today. In the latter respect only Greek may be comparable with Chinese. And it is precisely upon Chinese that we may illustrate several linguistic features that are undesirable or even incompatible with the position of a number one world language.

Chinese serves a complicated and rich culture, being a language of admirable historical continuity, spoken by the greatest number of people throughout the world, the language of an ethnic group that has gradually expanded into the whole of Southeast Asia. Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia are notable for their high relative weight in most of the respective countries (32 % in Malaysia, 14 % in Thailand, 3 % in Burma, 4 % in Indonesia and in the Philippines, less than 2 % in Vietnam and Cambodia) as well as for their business efficiency. This, however, does not qualify Chinese as an international language. Chinese has remained an almost exclusive medium of the Chinese even abroad. Ought an international language to fulfill some additional criteria as well? What hinders Chinese from becoming an ideal language of worldwide communication?

A language of such communication should have a sufficiently simple writing system used by more than one country, preferably of an alphabetic type. However, the Chinese language is bound to a virtually monoethnic script (nowadays used practically only in China and Japan, and in the latter country not exclusively) that has gradually evolved from pictorial logograms into the present-day mixed logographic/phonetic writing and the many thousands of Chinese characters in use ought not to be perceived simply as word characters but rather as morphematic characters (which does not mean that there are no monomorphemic words in the modern language). Mastering thousands of characters is a task for many years of study and those who do not start learning them at a relatively early age would be seriously handicapped. No wonder that most peoples that had embraced the Chinese writing at the dawn of their history, for example the Vietnamese and Koreans, have subsequently replaced it with simpler writing systems. The Japanese have tried to radically restrict the number of characters in everyday practice and incorporated into their usage two syllabic systems (katakana and hiragana) while even Roman characters are not excluded in some styles.

An ideal language of worldwide communication—if it should be widely accessible as a second language—would deserve as logical and as simple a writing system as possible, in short, a writing approaching the phonological type (one phoneme—one letter). However, no present-day script is as distant from this ideal as is Chinese writing. Let us add in advance that this demand is not met even by English where the inventory of letters is much smaller than that of phonemes becauseEnglish orthography inclines to the historical or even etymological principle.

Another inconvenient property is the specific nature of Chinese phonetics and phonotactics. Its inventory of syllables is very modest, their number can be enumerated and coincides with the inventory of morphemes. The Chinese language has to manage with 1324 syllabomorphemes and should we ignore the four tones as a suprasegmental feature, we would be left with mere 414 items! (Yartseva 1990, 225). Phonotactics of this kind obviously hampers the process of borrowing words from other languages which is in most other languages one of the chief ways of expanding their vocabulary. In addition, such a phonetic and phonotactic filter makes a satisfactory and precise reproduction of foreign nomina propria (personal names, toponyms, etc.) impossible.

And thus the Chinese language remains enclosed in itself and fenced by a stockade more efficient than once the Great Wall of China had been. While most other languages borrow Chinese words without serious difficulties, the Chinese have largely to make do with calquing.

Strict phonotactics is no ideal foundation for interethnic interference. As far as the inventory of phonemes is concerned, the optimum is somewhere midway between a very small number of sounds on the one hand and their proliferation on the other hand. If a language has very few phonemes (let us say fewer than 20) and in addition strict phonotactic rules admitting only two types of syllables, that is (V)V or CV(V) (cf. Polynesian languages and Japanese being not far from this state), this inevitably leads to a higher number of longer morphemes than most other languages display, which is far from a satisfactory solution from the point of view of efficiency. And vice versa, if the number of sounds is extremely high, approaching for example one hundred, those who would learn such a language as their second language, might be confronted with problems of perceiving and pronouncing such sounds, especially consonantal clusters— which would ultimately lead to their reduction and simplification (with the results depending upon the nature of the first language of the respective learners). A phonological inventory between the two extremes bears witness to the balance between efficiency and efficacy.

In the case of English the most burdensome problem is that linked to a considerable variability of its vowels both in synchrony and diachrony as indirectly hinted at by the psycholinguist I. Taylor. In accordance with a widespread opinion he believes that preference is given to the alternation of consonants and syllables (Taylor 1976, 154). His remark that vowels alone may be easy to articulate but are not easy to discriminate (ibid.) corresponds to the situation in English where the vowels are notable for their obvious articulatory and acoustic instability. He hints at this problem in his book when mentioning that the five Japanese vowels are more stable than English vowels (Taylor 1975, 39).

An *a priori* restricted number of syllables and morphemes leads to an excessively high level of homonymy that may precariously reduce the redundance of speech and hamper its interpretation and understanding. An exemplary instance of such effect is Japanese that very early started to assimilate Chinese words (or morphemes) on a large scale but without their tonal characteristics. This has amounted to a quadruple increase of homonymy when compared with the original situation in Chinese. Another source of lower redundance in Japanese is its more modest phonological inventory than that of Chinese. The insufficient phonetic redundance in Japanese is such a serious problem that the auxiliary usage of Chinese characters with lectures, in television, etc. is inevitable. The smooth oral communication in Japanese requires a deliberate removal of the superabundance of homonyms and their replacement by words free of homonymy. This means that Japanese is no suitable candidate for the function of a vehicle of interethnic communication. Japanese is notable for a further property that may occasionally hinder interpretation of utterances, especially in the written style. This concerns expressing complicated meaningful links in syntactic constructions corresponding to compound and complex sentences in Slovak and other European (and not only European) languages. It is especially the agglutinative languages (including Japanese) that are notable for their poverty or absence of conjunctions. This poverty is compensated for at the level of

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sentence structure by the strict constructive rule *determinant—determiné*. Complex sentences in Japanese are expanded, metaphorically speaking, from right-to-left while in Slovak (English, French, etc.), the opposite direction prevails (Yngve 1960). The right-to-left expansion may excessively burden our short-termed memory (Yngve 1960, 450). The problem of the interpretation of a construction expanded from right-to-left lies in the fact that it is more concerned with the syntactic dependence and less to the semantic connections between the individual components. And no wonder that the correct interpretation of such complexes may be difficult even for those who speak Japanese as their first language. It is only natural that languages of this type tend to borrow conjunctions from neighbouring languages of a different type. For example, Turkish has borrowed the coordinative conjunction "ve" and from Arabic ("wa"); in Turkish there had been no coordinative conjunction and the agglutinative languages use in its stead particles meaning "with". Hungarian, an agglutinative language surrounded by inflective languages from all sides, has under their influence and in the process of adjustment lost syntactic constructions based upon the right-to-left expansion rule (oral information by L. Drozdík). The left-to-right expansion does not burden the short-termed memory of the users of the language but also because it does not rely to such a great extent upon the strict rule "determinant–determine" but prefers operating with a relatively numerous and differentiated inventory of conjunctions. This gives the users of such a language the possibility to express the relations between the individual clauses of a complex sentence with more precision.

The means of expansion of the vocabulary of a language may also be judged from the point of view of communicative comfort and efficiency. The vocabulary may react to changes in the environment of the language and to the new needs of its speakers in several possible ways, such as derivation, composition, semantic shifts, borrowing. Do the languages disposing of a flexible istrumentarium of derivative affixes (like Spanish, Italian, Slavic languages or Indonesian) suit the dynamic needs of a modern language community better than the languages without such systematic means? Or is the readiness of many such languages to compensate their less developed affixal derivation by borrowing a positive phenomenon because this in fact enhances its international character and thus makes it easier to learn for the speakers of other languages?

A language of worldwide communication and the speedy spread of its knowledge is an ever increasing need. Artificial languages such as Esperanto are no adequate solution as it is proved by their considerable number as well as by their modest success if not total failure.

Today the only language suitable for the worldwide communication is English. Its status is a consequence of the historical circumstances of the anglophone countries and is linked with the role English has played in world policy, economics, sciences as well as in show business, amusement, suggestive mass media, the movie industry, pop-music, and sports and, of course, the way of life in general. The favourable dispersal of the users of English throughout the world is one of the most important factors in this respect and there is no other language that would be able to replace English in the near future.

But is English really a language of worldwide communication without any shortcomings?

As mentioned before, English phonetics has some troublesome properties. In the first place the subsystem of vowels seems to be in incessant movement. For example, in New

Zealand English /e/ in *set* gravitates to /i/, and i in *sit* gravitates to /ə/, /i:/ in *see* is changing into /ei/, while in *say* is pronounced as /ai/. There are of course other variations in English phonetics that may disturb smooth understanding—for example the reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables as well as a certain lability of the interdental /ð/ and /θ/ (written th).

Perhaps the most frequently debated and criticized complication of English is the absence of a regular or at least predictable correspondence between speech and writing. Some of the features of English orthography are reminiscent of what may take place in a process that deserves the term of hieroglyphization. Maybe the comparison of the English alphabet to hieroglyphs is an invention of Mark Twain who proposed to introduce a strictly phonological orthography and diacritical marks. His criticism of orthography is well known from his essay *Simplified Orthography* written probably in 1906. The present-day English alphabet was characterized by Mark Twain as a pure folly. The Canadian linguist Stephen Pinker does not agree with Mark Twain´s judgment and points out to the fact that no principal reform of English orthography has been carried out during centuries. George Bernard Shaw in his foreword to Wilson´s book *The Miraculous Birth of Language* speaks of a hopelessly insufficient alphabet compiled centuries before the rise of English and applied to a very different language. And even this alphabet was reduced to an absurdity by a mistaken orthography based upon the idea that the task of orthography consists in representing the origin and history of words instead of their sound and meaning (Wilson 1941, 22) Shaw´s new transcript of English reminiscent of stenography has not and could not be accepted.

A speaker of English complains in the following poem:

A *moth* is not a *moth* in *mother*,
Nor *both* in *bother*, *broth* in *brother*,
And *here* is not a match for *there*,
Nor *dear* and *fear* for *bear* and *pear*.
And then there´s *dose* and *rose* and *lose*
Just look them up – and *goose* and *goose*,
And *cork* and *work* and *card* and *ward*,
And *font* and *front* and *word* and *sword*,
And *do* and *go* and *thwart* and *cart* –
Come, come, I´have hardly made a start!

The text is based on the absence of a correlation between orthography and pronunciation, on the absence that not only admits differing pronunciation of homographs but also homophonous reading of words spelt in different ways opposite and was published in S. Pinker´s book Words and Rules (Pinker 2003).

Frequent homonymy is obviously no welcome property of a language of interethnic communication. Translators from English are well aware of the problems and misunderstandings with which they are confronted when trying to translate sequences containing such verbs as *set, get, put, go, run, turn*, etc. Homonymy or polysemy is a plague of English philosophical terminology, especially when we compare it with German terminology. For example, *notion* is listed as meaning both Begriff and Vorstellung; *conception* as Begriff, Konzeption, Vorstellung, *idea* as Begriff and Vorstellung, etc. In other fields of research, however, English terminology has become a

model followed by other languages—in computer science, astrophysics, nuclear physics, but also in show business and sports—because the English terminology of these domains of activity arose spontaneously (*in situ*) in England and USA while other peoples often acquired the existing terms before the objects themselves.

English has a relatively simple morphology—few "irregularities", absence of morphonological alternations (excepting irregular verbs), an absence of inflective declination and minimal conjugation, an absence of a formalized category of gender and of syntactic agreement which makes learning English as a second language quite easy, at least in the first stage; the complications come later, especially when dealing with phraseology. Complicated nominal classification seems to be receding even in such languages as Japanese (Makino, Tsutsui 1966) and Indonesian where it is present in the form of numeratives required for linking substantives with numerals.

Another positive property of English is its openness to borrowing words from other languages. In syntax, one has to appreciate the existence of the means of syntactic compression useful first of all in journalistic style.

In our modern world where the horizontal mobility of the population is ever increasing and especially where the cities have turned into a mixture not only of dialects but also of languages, no language too sensitive to extremely differentiated and complicated courtesy would meet the demands of interethnic communication. That is the reason why Bahasa Indonesia was given preference in the Indonesian Republic, not Javanese notable for its sophisticated cultivation of politeness. Incidentally, keigo "polite language" as a special courteous style is gradually losing some of its specificities in the mouths of the younger Japanese generation.

Despite all the objections to the various shortcomings of English, no realistic alternative to it exists so far. Esperanto as the most successful language created by humans does not have much hope—if any—of replacing English upon the throne. Esperanto leans (both grammatically and lexically) on a relatively narrow circle of Central European languages but it cannot rely upon a sufficiently rich community of people that would be willing to support the grandiose project of a new worldwide language. English is the first language of hundreds of millions of people distributed throughout all the continents (partly as an official language of their countries) and furthermore hundreds of millions of people are capable of appreciating the wealth of information readily accessible in periodicals, books, in television or on the Internet. And perhaps this mass of knowledge is one of the most reliable safeguards of a long-termed functioning and functionality of English as the most important vehicle of worldwide communication.

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