

LANGUAGE EQUALITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**Contribution of Humphrey Tonkin
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A Language ready for international use

New modes of communication customarily have both a broadening and a narrowing effect. When the system of printing by movable type was discovered in Europe (printing had already been invented in China, but the Chinese did not have an alphabetic writing system at their disposal), the resultant reduction in the cost of reproducing texts enabled the growth of local markets and consequently the use of regional languages (rather than Latin, up to then normally used for manuscript copies). At the same time, however, these printed reproductions were distributed in the hinterlands of the countries concerned, driving out and marginalizing *their* local languages. Thus, texts in the various national languages proliferated as the influence of the unified, international Latin declined; but the growth in national languages also brought decline at the other end of the scale, to marginalized local languages.

When in the nineteenth century transportation systems were revolutionized, military science was industrialized, and the telegraph and later the telephone came into being, one section of the population found prosperity while others – industrial workers, and particularly the inhabitants of colonized countries – remained locked out of this prosperity. People traveled more and had more contact with one another, to do business or to find work. The international language situation also underwent profound change – and in northeastern Europe a great visionary, Lazar Ludwik Zamenhof, a member of the expanding middle class, confronted by the frustration which he and the other ever more frequent travelers in his social class felt in the face of language difference, created the International Language that we are using today for this meeting.

Then in the 1980s and 1990s came the Internet. Its global reach abolished distances and ignored language differences based on geography, with the result that the English language, already growing stronger in comparison with the other major languages, became incontestably the most used and the most studied language in the world. Yet at the same time the speakers of smaller languages discovered one another through the Internet, and, by using inexpensive web-pages and listservs, formed unprecedented cooperative contacts. Particularly Esperanto, that most international of languages, but also a small language, enjoyed and continues to enjoy amazing advantages, which are increasingly exploited for the purpose of distributing learning materials, texts and activities designed to enhance knowledge of the language, and organizational aids. Although this revolution is not much in evidence in traditional organizational structures

like the Universal Esperanto Association, or in traditional publishing, or in local classroom courses, clearly a major expansion has occurred in the number of people learning and using Esperanto – mostly directly, unorganized, in fact almost without external trace. Among the great challenges confronting today's Esperanto movement is the question of how to make the best use of the new means of communication to disseminate the language and raise its profile in the eyes of the external public.

The contradictions of the steady progress in international communication have had their effect on Esperanto throughout its history. Almost a hundred years ago, the Esperantists held their first World Congress, in France, in Boulogne-sur-Mer, in 1905. They arrived in Boulogne mostly by train, partly by steamer – inventions of the previous century that enabled this congregation of people in a single place, where they could use spoken Esperanto, and develop and expand it. This conversational language rapidly became flexible and fully internalized among the more competent users, precisely because they could now meet relatively easily, even across political and linguistic borders, thanks to modern transportation.

As early as the first days of Esperanto, the newly created network of rapid international mail service (the Universal Postal Union was founded in 1875; Esperanto appeared in 1887) had made the speedy exchange of messages possible, and consequently also the rapid establishment of linguistic norms in Esperanto. Thus the beginnings of written Esperanto prospered thanks to the new mail service, and the spoken language advanced thanks to the ease of human transportation: without these facilities, it is hardly possible that the language could have achieved structural stability and expanded its lexicon and other features so rapidly and effectively.

Ready, but still not widely distributed

But the fact that this neutral language, serving as a bridge among people of various linguistic origins, matured so rapidly *as a language* in no sense meant that it would also mature as a movement. Or – more precisely – the fact that it fully realized the dream of its creator as an instrument of communication did not automatically cause its wide distribution. It did indeed prove fully flexible and functional; and it established a new equality among the native speakers of different languages, so that, by using Esperanto, one party did not dominate the other, nor submitted to the language preferences of the other. On the one hand the language stood ready for wide international application; on the other, the number of users remained relatively low. Although the movement for Esperanto touched several important twentieth-century intellectual currents (from structuralism to the movement to romanize Chinese) it was largely unsuccessful in gathering much international influence. Educators gave it little attention, governments were uninterested in its dissemination, learned academicians did not propose its immediate application: the fact that it was based on principles of linguistic equality said little, for example, to persuade governments to use it. When its use in the League of Nations was proposed, a very favorable report was filed by the Deputy Secretary-General, the Japanese Nitobe Inazo, but the member-states, primarily under the influence of

France, did not give it sufficient support, and French and English remained the official working languages of the League. In truth, the diplomats in Geneva were for the most part competent in one of these two languages: they were, after all, chosen by their governments on this basis. Although these languages clearly gave an advantage to their native speakers, this inequality was less burdensome than the supposedly heavy task of learning a whole new language, namely Esperanto, simply in order to have equality.

As for the French, they submitted, without any great enthusiasm, to the use of English in Geneva. Up until the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, French was widely recognized as the language of diplomacy: it was normally used in the relations between states. But already by the end of the previous century its influence was declining in other domains, particularly business, where the use of English was steadily expanding, in part because of the outstanding strength of the British economy and in part because of the growing might of the United States. At Versailles, two of the principals did not speak French: Lloyd George, of Britain, who emphasized to excess his roots as a man of the people with no great education, and Woodrow Wilson, of the United States, who had apparently not learned much French at school. Because of their insistence English was used in addition to French – and this gain for English was carried over to the language regime of the League of Nations, where it was decided to use consecutive interpretation in both directions between English and French. The French evidently considered their language strong enough to resist further erosion of its position, but their refusal to compromise, for example by at least considering the merits of Esperanto, essentially left English free to expand its influence.

When, following World War II, the United Nations Organization was founded, there was a real possibility, or so some people felt, that the UN might choose a neutral language, but technological progress dictated a different course: the invention of a new system for simultaneous interpretation, based on interpreters' booths, wired connections, and headsets, allowed for the acceptance of as many as five or six different languages, so that the languages of the victors of the World War – Chinese, English, French, Russian, and also Spanish – became equal in status in the General Assembly. Once again this was a technological innovation which at one and the same time facilitated diversity and strengthened the strongest. Partly because the great powers were satisfied with this new regime, in the very early years of the UN the Universal Esperanto Association, in spite of its efforts, was unsuccessful in catching the attention of the organization with its less costly and more effective linguistic medium. At an early stage, the UN transferred the question of Esperanto to Unesco, the newly founded agency for education, science and culture, thereby escaping a problem it preferred not to address.

In 1954, exactly fifty years ago, Unesco passed a resolution favorable to Esperanto – as a language worth learning and as a movement that supported to aims and ideals of Unesco itself, but not at all as a language worth using as a means of communication in international organizations: the Esperantists did not even argue for such a lofty goal, and Unesco was silent on the matter. The resolution accepted by Unesco at the General Conference in Montevideo in 1954 opened the way for formal contacts between UEA on the one hand and Unesco and later the United Nations on the other, but in no way did it

imply any concrete decision to use Esperanto as a working language.¹ Both organizations were ruled by a hegemony of the major languages – but a hegemony acceptable, even if somewhat inconvenient, to the native speakers of other languages. The Esperantists, despite their insistent efforts, failed to convince the leaders of these organizations even to try the language out, despite the fact that it was essentially ready for such a test and in the long run would undoubtedly prove less expensive (and probably more effective) than the solution of six different languages,² among which interpretation and translation were required – and the fact that use of a single but neutral language would drastically facilitate interpersonal relations.

The problem lies in the reality that to many people language equality seems a contradiction in terms. Languages, according to such skeptics, are weapons in the competition among nations: because they are linked with specific geographical regions, specific states, and spoken by specific people in specific circumstances, they are expressions of these people, in no sense (according to these skeptics) capable of creating equality among people in general, who express themselves in different ways.... And if one defines the phenomenon of language according to political and geographical definitions, then a language without geographic base, without a political identity, is simply impossible. Therefore, Esperanto does not exist. And therefore (to take the argument to an absurd conclusion) the Esperantists have found a way of communicating linguistically without using a language!

Extreme linguistic diversity as an obstacle to an equitable solution

France's decision in the 1920s to support its own language and prevent any discussion of Esperanto at all, although it was expressed through cultural arguments (that Esperanto, created by "art" rather than "nature" – whatever that may mean – was not a "real" language) was purely political. If one proceeds from the premise that the only "real" languages in the world are those linked to states, one inevitably opens oneself up to a situation in which the various national languages jostle one another to accumulate influence. The economically strongest (not the culturally strongest: the French have always deceived themselves on this point) have a greater chance of success – and the more divided the opposition, the easier the progress.

This was precisely the situation of the English language, which slowly but insistently gained against French. Although the French empire was still very much in existence after the Second World War, and although France beat the Germans, the French economy could hardly compete with that of the United States or even, in the early stages, of Britain. After the first World War, the French were obliged to accept the use of English; after the second, they had to accept the use in the General Assembly of four, and later five, other

¹ On the significance of the recognition of Esperanto on the part of Unesco, see my analysis: Humphrey Tonkin, "De Montevideo al Sofio: Esperanto antaŭ Unesko kaj Unesko antaŭ Esperanto" in Lee Chong-Yeong, ed., *Esperanto en la 21-a jarcento*. (Seoul: Korea Esperanto-Asocio, 2001): 277-301.

² Arabic was added as a language of the General Assembly in 1973.

languages. French retained its position in the UN Secretariat, where it was one of two working languages, but even there we have witnessed a steady drop-off in its influence and a rise in the influence of English, among other things because of the large number of new and old member-states using English as an official language of government. In the year 2000, only four languages were used by more than 10 members: English, French, Arabic, and Spanish. Of these, 74 used English – more than all the other three combined, namely 25 for French, 19 for Arabic, and 18 for Spanish.³ The number of documents at the UN and Unesco (and also in the European Union) written originally in English, as opposed to other languages, continues to increase.

As long as there were only two major languages in international relations – French and English – at least there was a clear rivalry. After World War II, with the addition of four other languages to a position of relative strength in the UN, the fragmentation of the linguistic regime left English freer to advance its influence. The weaker “major” languages – French, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic – were so busy working to preserve their own positions against the still weaker, unrecognized languages, that they forgot to rein in the strongest. Thus, while they competed among themselves, English continued its growth, primarily in informal interactions where no rules applied.

This growth of English was apparent in all other domains. Although Chinese is the world language most used as a native language (around 1.2 billion – though with great diversity of usage⁴), and although only a third of that figure speaks English as a native language, there are large numbers of users of English as an additional language in their repertoire (i.e. users with relative fluency), and even larger numbers (perhaps as many as a billion) using and learning it as a foreign language. Even if we accept the fact (already well known to Esperantists) that such statistics are deeply unreliable, we cannot escape the reality that the English language has captured a dominant position in international linguistic usage. French still has a large number of people who use it as a second language (in this sense it resembles English, and to some degree Russian), but this number, for example in Africa, is small compared to English.⁵

Now comes a further factor – the Internet. The Internet has undoubtedly accelerated the international use of English, and the processes of internationalization, of globalization, tend to be expressed through English. Today, it seems likely that a majority of the regular users of English are not native speakers: they use the language for all purposes,

³ Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, *Linguistic Genocide in Education – Or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000: 300. In some cases, for example Canada, more than one of these languages is used by a given government.

⁴ We are really dealing here not with native speakers of “Chinese” but with native speakers of several language varieties, who, when they learn to read, are capable of reading the same Chinese text.

⁵ William F. Mackey, in his essay “Forecasting the fate of languages” (in Jacques Maurais & Michael A. Morris, ed. *Languages in a Globalising World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 64-66), insists on the fact that the number of African speakers of French is growing because of simple population growth and the improvement of educational services, but in my opinion he is too optimistic.

even to organize themselves against the so-called hegemony of the United States and against imperialism.

Meanwhile, the native speakers of English maintain and strengthen their influence. Recently the Universal Esperanto Association lodged a protest against the large numbers of positions within the European Union that required “a native knowledge of English,” thereby discriminating against non-native speakers. Such native speakers of English enjoy a major advantage in international negotiation, in debate, in contacts with the press, and generally in the influencing of world public opinion. Yes, one can fully learn this complicated English language, even to the extent of virtual equality with a native speaker – but it requires a large investment of time and other resources. That entire nations seek to achieve such a level of equality, and expend a large part of their national product doing so, is not only unjust, but also for the most part utopian – and nowhere more evidently than in China. And if, at some point in the future, such a result were attainable, what would happen to their own cultures, their own values? Would they also grow redundant and disappear? English is indeed much more than simply a language (all languages are more than languages...): it is a transmitter of cultural values, a software system as monopolistic as Windows.⁶ In the present historical moment it certainly makes sense to learn the language, but not at the expense of other ways of participating in the international life.

The disadvantages of division

If we cast an eye over the national investment in language-learning – the quantity of resources expended by the educational system to educate pupils about foreign languages, the resources used for similar purposes in commercial and other enterprises, the cost of translating books and other documents into the local language, costs associated with communication problems because of language difference, we see that the highest percentage of costs lies with those who do not use one of the major world languages; in the middle reside those states that do use one of the major languages (other than English); right at the bottom, with the lowest investment in the learning of foreign languages, sit the English-speaking countries – the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand.

The advantages enjoyed by these countries are not simply that they avoid having to spend so much money in learning foreign languages: because their language is widely used they enjoy numerous other advantages. Foreign students flock to their universities, bringing with them money and intellectual capability; tourists visit their cities; they have strong publishing industries; they export various cultural products, and their cultural norms dominate the international sphere more and more. But here lies the dilemma: the more the rest of the world adapts itself to these norms, and thereby attempts to share the

⁶ On the subtle relationship between language and power, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), translated as *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

advantages with the English-speaking countries, the more their own cultural identity is obliterated.

In his recent book on the language situation in the European Union⁷, the linguist Robert Phillipson points out that the incapability of the various member-states to establish a functional language policy is in the meantime opening the EU to domination by the strongest language, namely English, along with its cultural products. As we have already remarked, the more diverse the official languages, the freer the major language is to expand its influence. A lack of policy, as Phillipson rightly asserts, is in itself a policy. In this non-policy policy environment the strongest language, namely English, is gaining influence at the cost of all other languages, which are divided from, and competitive with, one another and accordingly powerless.

Precisely such a situation prevailed in South Africa when in 1966 that country established its new language policy. Under the apartheid regime, two languages, Afrikaans and English, were the only official government languages. But the Constitution of 1996 recognized eleven languages as official languages: the two “white” languages and nine African languages. According to the 1991 census, 21.9% speak Zulu as their native language, 17% speak Xhosa, 15% Afrikaans, 9.6% Northern Sotho, and 9% English. But the simple declaration that all eleven languages are equal does not make them so: English and Afrikaans remain the most prestigious languages, and English, particularly, has become the key language for education, for economic prosperity, and for international contacts. Those who seek prosperity in South Africa learn and use English. The South African government, even if it wanted to change this situation, really does not have the resources to make all eleven languages equal in practice as well as in theory. By increasing the number of official languages, the government opened the way to strengthening English, in the absence of other solutions.⁸

The great French preacher Lacordaire (1802-1861) once said that “Between the strong and the weak, liberty is the oppressor.” Where the game is fully free, the strong team writes the rules, if rules exist at all. For this reason, various western countries occupying a strong economic position argue in favor of the completely free flow of information, completely open and free markets, and so on. Compared to the alternatives (unlimited dictatorship, censorship), these arguments have their merits, but, unless nuanced, they lead to the reinforcement of the strong and the enfeeblement of the weak. Openness must be accompanied by rules acting as balances to protect and defend the weaker players to prevent their being engulfed by the strong. It is hard to find the right balance between protectionism and libertarianism, but without such shields the system does not work. We risk a similar situation with respect to the free market in languages.

⁷ Robert Phillipson, *Ĉu nur-angla Eŭropo? Defio al lingva politiko* (Rotterdam: Universala Esperanto-Asocio, 2004), translation of *English-only Europe? Challenging Language Policy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁸ See for example Jan Bernsten, “English in South Africa: Expansion and nativization in concert,” *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 25 (2001): 219-235, and the articles in the soon-to-be-published special issue of this same journal (vol. 28 [2004], number 2) under the editorship of Nkonko Kamwangamalu and Timothy Reagan.

The world language system and the role of Esperanto

The Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan argues persuasively that such a world market in languages does indeed exist.⁹ According to his way of thinking, there exists a world language system, characterized by constant competition for influence: one language gains as another loses; one language extends its reach while another retreats and loses power. The system is hierarchical and interactive, with numerous weak languages, which orbit around strong regional languages – which in turn orbit around the great world languages (primarily English). This competitive process has been in existence since human society began – but the fact that it has always existed is not in itself a reason for giving it free passage. Needed is a clear international policy on language, in which the users of the great international languages – those of the UN for example, except for English – band together against the growing influence of English, not in a spirit of destruction, but to counteract that influence by joint action.

First, of course, we have to accept the principle that linguistic diversity is in itself a good thing. Extreme diversity does indeed have its limitations in a modern world where people are in constant interaction, constant communication, but the assumption that the only alternative is the use of English for international communication and the use of one's own language in other circumstances (perhaps with a regional language as a third medium) is erroneous.

Because it was constructed to serve as an international linking language, Esperanto does not resemble other languages. Behind it sits a relatively weak movement: in principle it is neutral, without connections with the major power blocs. Even for non-Europeans it is definitely more easily learned than the other European languages, among them English. If it were generally used, even in quite limited contexts, it would save governments a significant investment in foreign-language learning. More importantly, an investment in Esperanto similar to that now expended for English would lead to a much deeper knowledge of the language in question and consequently to richer and deeper relations with learners of the language in other countries. I am not suggesting that countries like China suddenly stop teaching English and start exclusively teaching Esperanto – but that an international agreement to employ Esperanto in international organizations, for example, could revolutionize the balance of power in these organizations, or that a decision to teach the language in the schools of five or six countries could result in a level of understanding among those countries that would lead to new cultural and economic capability.

Recently, in circumstances reminiscent of the decisions in the League of Nations, the EU has refused even to consider the potential of Esperanto as an alternative to the present official language chaos in the EU institutions. Apparently because of their belief that only English will work, or that only the present influence of French, German or Italian must be protected, EU functionaries have refused to carry out the scientific study of costs

⁹ Abram de Swaan, *Words of the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

and benefits that any serious approach to language planning must complete.¹⁰ The technique for such studies is well established, among other things because of the application of these principles in the formation of language policy in countries such as Canada. But it seems that only a really courageous government would be prepared to step outside current norms to try for a deeper reform of the present international linguistic regime.

Perhaps China is that country, that government. China possesses the language most widely-used as a native language in the world, but a language whose potential as a global language is very limited and unlikely; China possesses one of the world's most rapidly growing economies, but functions in an international environment largely determined by the countries of Europe and North America. China is the right country to work for a new international language equality that would help level out the competition among the various countries and perhaps even create a new intensity of international co-operation. For many years China has related to Esperanto with sympathy, with its support for Esperanto radio programs, its publication of major Chinese literary works in Esperanto, its dissemination of Esperanto through the Chinese Esperanto League and in other ways. As a country unidentified with the European tradition, but seeking an alternative path, it naturally finds in Esperanto an idea with similar goals. In a recent article in a Bangladeshi newspaper, A.F.G. Mohiuddin labeled Esperanto a language for "meaningful globalization."¹¹ Such "meaningful globalization" is the aim of the new-old countries of South and East Asia – lands of ancient civilizations, now seeking to link those civilizations with the modern world.

The topic of the present congress is "Language equality in international relations." I hope that we will explore the topic from both theoretical and practical points of view, answering the questions, "What is language equality?" and "How, from a practical standpoint, should we establish such equality internationally?" I cannot imagine a more suitable location in which to explore this topic than China.

The topic has various aspects. First, we might ask what we mean by international relations – what constitutes a desirable international way of life? The various countries of the world constitute bundles of cultural norms, which interact within themselves and in turn interact with cultural bundles across the world. Once upon a time, the international life was largely limited to the interrelationships of states, or to activities strictly monitored by states, but today it has taken on many colors and many aspects. National norms no longer apply as fully as they once did, and international cultural connections are more diverse.

Could we in fact create equality in these complex human interactions? What does such equality consist of, and in what sense is current international interaction in fact unequal?

¹⁰ See for example Mark Fettes, "Interlingualism: A world-centric approach to language policy and planning" in Humphrey Tonkin & Timothy Reagan, ed., *Language in the 21st Century* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2003): 47-58.

¹¹ A.F.G. Mohiuddin, "Towards a just world: Esperanto for meaningful globalisation," *The Independent (Bangladesh)*, 10 July 2003.

Is the problem simply linguistic inequality? If so, could Esperanto, created to equalize international relations, eliminate such inequality? Are its claims as an instrument of equality correct? And if we are dealing with more than inequalities of language, what role might Esperanto or other alternative solutions play in the construction of a more equal world?

Finally, and not least importantly, how can we depart from the current hegemonic situation to move toward a less hegemonic one? How can we convince those who now control international relations to pursue a different path? Personally, I am convinced that the only way is to forge an alliance among those whose languages are discriminated against – even if these languages have official standing in international contexts – to insist on a new, revolutionarily simple solution, namely the International Language Esperanto. But it is not enough just to glory in the advantages of Esperanto: we must confront the current situation realistically, and we must scientifically, intentionally, set about changing it. For ages, Esperantists have rightly gloried in their language: now the time has come to take action from the modest political base at their disposal, by realistic advocacy of the readiness of Esperanto to play a new international role.

[translation, June 8, 2004]