

Esperanto *versus* English: A Comparison between Two Bridge Languages

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Abstract: *This article makes a comparison between English and Esperanto, as both languages may be considered international auxiliary languages. The comparison intends to bring to the fore some of the political and cultural issues related to the emergence of a natural language, namely English, as a global language, at the same time that it analyzes some of the considerations indicated by the advocates of Esperanto.*

Keywords: *Esperanto, English, international auxiliary language, lingua franca, artificial language.*

The dream of a perfect world where everybody spoke the same language and, thus, could understand each other's feelings and ideas without any communication barriers has been cherished by several individuals. As in our world conflict and war are not uncommonly related to xenophobia and cultural problems, it is usually understood that the lack of communication is one of the main reasons for those problems. The conclusion which is easily reached from this observation is that if we all shared a language, we would not fight. Obviously, this is a naïve conception of understanding and peace, and it does not take into account the fact that perfect communication is something that can never be achieved. At the same time, cultural, ethnical and geographical conflicts do not exist because of a lack of competent translators and interpreters in the battle zone. Nevertheless, this conception shows how language is viewed as one of the most important factors that contribute to the good or bad relationship between peoples.

This article focuses on two languages that either have a clear intention of becoming a global language or have really achieved the status of a bridge language: Esperanto and English. The first is an artificial and relatively new language which carries an explicit ideological goal of solving some of the inevitable problems

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concerning the communication between people with different mother tongues. The second is a language with a history, attached to cultures and peoples, and that has become more and more preeminent in the last decades. Despite their obvious differences, a comparison between these two languages may be fruitful to raise some important issues related to the existence of a global language for international communication.

Having one language which could make possible or facilitate the contacts among different countries and cultures cannot be a neutral fact. Be it an artificial or a natural language, or the ones used as bridge language, there will be consequences that cannot be ignored. As it the preeminent language of today is English, and not Esperanto, this essay will focus on the possible consequences and implications of the emergence of the first. These implications can be more easily indicated if we compare them with the imaginable effects of the use of Esperanto as a global language.

Paulo Rónai, to whom the theme of the multiple languages and the problems of this Babel we live in were fascinating, attests his astonishment in his essay “Começos da luta contra Babel”:

“A impressionante história dos esforços despendidos para a construção de um idioma auxiliar universal relata uma das aventuras mais curiosas do espírito humano na sua luta para livrar-se do irracional e organizar sensatamente o mundo das idéias e da sua expressão. Tentativa antipoética, por sua essência, mas que, pela audácia do empreendimento, se torna um verdadeiro poema, em que o heróico e o burlesco aparecem juntos mais de uma vez (...)” (Rónai, 1970, p.22).

One of the widely known dreamers of a world which would not suffer with language barriers was a Jewish ophthalmologist, born in 1859, in Bialystok (at the time part of the Russian Empire). Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof noticed, at a very young age, that his neighbors were constantly involved in quarrels and misunderstandings. Those only happened with such regularity because – he supposed – these people didn’t share the same language (in Bialystok, there were Jews, Lithuanians, Germans, Russians and Poles, each group speaking its own language). This early experience left strong marks in the character of the man, who thought the world would be better if there were a language that could be shared by all the peoples. This romantic hope was the origin of Esperanto.

Zamenhof decided to create a new language that would fit that ambitious purpose. Esperanto is the result of his work: a language which has a simple phonetic system, extremely easy grammar rules that support no exceptions and an agglutinative morphological system that facilitates the memorizing of new vocabulary¹. Above all, the most important characteristic of Esperanto is not its structural simplicity, but its artificiality. It was invented by an individual and, furthermore, belongs neither to a culture nor to a nation. It is the language of nobody. That was a prerequisite for this language to be, one day, the language of all peoples.

There is no need to say that Esperanto has not achieved its goal of becoming the universal second language of all peoples. It is spoken, today, by about only 2 million people in the world and, although there are universities and means of communication that actually use it as one of their languages, the truth is that it is far from being a *lingua franca*. Nevertheless, there is one language that has been more and more considered as a global language: English. Milton Santos, one of the most respected Brazilian geographers; attests in a very interesting article that

(...) o sonho de uma língua única, encarnado por uma língua artificial, o Esperanto, não logrou concretizar-se. É uma língua natural que, neste fim de século, parece conseguir se impor a um mundo artificializado. (...) A nova arquitetura do mundo, da qual resulta a globalização a que estamos assistindo, se funda na universalidade de um único sistema técnico. E, nas condições atuais, tudo o que se refere a ações hegemônicas na vida econômica, política e cultural parece se dizer em inglês (Santos, 2000).

The importance of the English language today can be easily shown by some not very precise, but still eloquent, figures. It is estimated that somewhere between 300 and 400 million people in the world have English as their mother tongue. If this number is already difficult to be established, it is even trickier and more troublesome to calculate the sum of speakers of English as a second language (something between 199–1,400 million people)².

It is true that English is quickly spreading around the world and that it has been seen as a global language – or as a type of universal second language – by many

¹ For a brief and satisfactory exposition about the grammar of Esperanto, refer to Eco, 2001, p. 392-395.

² “English language”, in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*; (Wikimedia Foundation Inc.) [encyclopedia on-line]; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EnglishLanguage>; Internet; retrieved 15 June 2010.

linguists and thinkers. In 1962, Pierre Burney questioned himself if English was a world language and presented several numbers that attested the growth of this language, even though he did not believe that English was close to triumph due to huge political obstacles, such as the impossibility of the spreading of the language of the USA in the socialist world (Burney, 1962, p.71). In his book “A Aventura das Línguas”, Hans Joachim Störig names a chapter *English, the new universal language*.

We can easily notice the increasing number of language institutes in our country, all of them promising fast and efficient English to their students. People want and need to learn English, otherwise, as the standard advertisements put it, they will not be good enough to take part in the job market and in the global economy, nor to enjoy the entertainment culture, which is mostly produced in that language. In other words, these language courses are sold as a passport to freedom and to a better financial and professional life. Those who do not speak English are somehow shown as excluded from a large parcel of the world.

In this context, we have to take into account the political and cultural issues associated to the rising importance of English language. A comparison between Esperanto and English may be very fruitful for the identification of some of the most relevant problems related to this question. After all, Zamenhof made an effort to create a brand new language, even though he was a scholar in several languages and knew how perfect in itself each one of them was. Why would he consider that the construction of an artificial system was extremely relevant when it would have been much easier to use one of the already existing languages to play that universal role?

That is a most crucial point. English is the national language of at least 50 countries, but at the same time it is inevitably related to the North American culture and society. The United States of America is considered, in our contemporary age, the most powerful country in the world, when it comes to the size of economy, military power and media influence. This is a fact that can be contested, especially if we consider that, lately, the American empire has been facing severe difficulties and other countries have been playing a growing part in the world's economy. But, regardless of those events, we can, for the purposes of this argumentation, consider that when people mention the English language they are most probably referring to the language spoken in the US, not the language spoken in Jamaica or India.

Esperanto, on the other hand, is the language of nobody. It is not related to any country or any particular society, and, consequently, it could be the language of everybody. That makes Esperanto less biased than any national language could be. This brings neutrality that not even a “dead language” could achieve. Zamenhof considered the possibility of classical Greek or Latin becoming an international auxiliary language. And it was not an original idea. Others have thought about the necessity of a global language, especially in the 19th century. As Gustave Flaubert reported in *L'education sentimentale*, there were other people considering the problem of communication between peoples in Europe at that time:

Michel-Evariste-Népomucène Vincent, a former professor, proposes that European democracy adopts a single language: a dead language might come in handy, an updated form of Latin, for example (Flaubert, 1869)³.

One thing to consider is that neither Latin nor Greek has disappeared from the world. Latin, especially, has always been a language that brought together people from more privileged classes, such as intellectuals, members of the clergy and the high society in general. It has never been widespread across all of the social classes and it served the purpose of excluding, intentionally, the majority of the society from the relevant debates. Chances would be that, by using Latin as a world language, the same sort of exclusion would be revived and reinforced.

When Rónai explains the reasons that would make it impossible for Latin to become a vehicle for international communication in the Modern Age, his argumentation privileges the particularities of the language itself, not the social and cultural consequences of its possible usage. He says it would be necessary to recreate Latin so it would fit modern purposes. This recreation would be pointless if it did not simplify the intricate Latin grammar; on the other hand, a simplification would not respect the greatness and the legacy of the classic language (Rónai, 1970, p.24).

More interesting for this discussion are the arguments that were manipulated by the advocates of Esperanto to explain why it would be undesirable that an already existing natural language become the international auxiliary language. The reasons they

³ Flaubert, G. *apud* Archibugi, D. 2004, p.2.

present might help us to identify some issues related to the global spreading of English nowadays, even when these reasons are too partial in a pro-Esperanto way.

That is the case of José Passini's "Bilingüismo: utopia ou antibabel?" the argumentation of which leads to the conclusion that Esperanto is the best (not to say the only) alternative for prejudice-free global communication. It is not the point of this article to question this biased statement, not because we do agree with the utopian possibility of neutrality in the language field, but because it does not fit the purpose of this comparison between Esperanto and English. The fact that English (and all of the other natural languages) was rejected for the role of international lingua franca says much about the consequences of having a natural language in this central position.

Passini affirms in the conclusion of his abovementioned book that the choice of an ethnic language to be an Interlingua⁴ gives the natives of the chosen language an advantage over those who would have to learn it as a foreign language. Besides that, the global adoption of the language of one (or a few) nations would grant those nations the status of intellectual metropolises⁵. In his words, to officially accept a language of "other" people is to psychologically submit to their cultural and political influence (Passini, p.146). This is clearly an exaggeration; cultural submission is a far more complex process than Passini's statement implies. However, there is merit in this concern about the possible emergence of international crises, hegemonies and cultural domination (which could result from the adoption of a natural language as the international auxiliary language). This concern is recognized as praiseworthy even by Rónai, who is not a defender of Esperanto (Rónai, 1970, p.23).

The fact that it seemed to the designer of Esperanto that it was essential that the world's second language be an artificial one says much. That way, we would not have a culture, a society or some people privileged by having their own language raised to the status of universal second language. With the adoption of a supposedly neutral language, citizens of each country would have to learn it systematically, as a second language, and their proficiency would be related to the effort they would put into it. That does not happen with English. If two people from different nationalities are

⁴ "(...) para nomear-se uma língua usada como elemento de comunicação entre aloglotas, ao invés de usar-se indistintamente o termo língua internacional, prefere-se interlíngua por sua maior abrangência e por ficar num campo mais lingüístico do que político". (Passini, 1993, p. 27)

⁵ "Aceitar oficialmente o idioma de outro povo é elevar o país de origem desse idioma à condição de metrópole internacional". (Passini, 1993, p. 146)

communicating in English, and one of them is a native speaker while the other has learnt it as a second language, the former will be in great advantage over the latter. Inequality between nations and countries cannot be avoided when we choose a most relevant symbol of a specific culture, say, the language, to become a universal tool for all societies.

This fact leads us to a second problem. Esperanto was designed to be an international auxiliary language; it should be used between native speakers of different languages in a communicative situation. As there are not (nor should there be) native speakers of Esperanto, both counterparts in a dialogue would be struggling with a language that is not theirs. That could, ideally, provide the debate with political and cultural neutrality. A North American individual would be on the same level as his Finnish or Korean interlocutor.

Some people have been calling English a lingua franca. There are several contexts in which it is the case. When we invite a Chinese researcher to give a lecture in our universities, it is likely that he will talk in English, to an audience of Portuguese speakers. When Egyptians are in contact with Israelis, as they do not share the same cultural and linguistic background and have to find a common ground to communicate, chances are they will use English as their lingua franca.



Scene from the film “Bikur Ha-Tizmoret” (The Band’s visit), in which Egyptian members of a band travel to Israel to take part in a festival but, after taking the wrong bus, find themselves lost in a Israeli village where they are forced to communicate with its inhabitants in a lingua franca, English.⁶

Nevertheless, it is much more common to find a native speaker of English (notably an American or an English person) who uses his mother tongue to communicate with people who speak his language, but with less proficiency, as it is expected from a non-native. This situation is often shown in American cinema, when we have the typical situation of an American person in a foreign country communicating with other people in English – regardless of any difficulties that might appear, it is always the other person who will make an effort to speak the American’s language, not the opposite.



“Before Sunrise”, an American movie in which a French girl and an American young man meet in Vienna and have a lightning love affair. Regardless of being in a territory where German is spoken, they speak English all the time, even when the girl faces some difficulties with this language.⁷

Finally, a third point of comparison between Esperanto and English is that, while the first has always had the clear and explicit objective of becoming a world language, the latter seems to have reached its present status accidentally. But one cannot assume that any other language would have reached this distinguished position in the 20th century. The spreading of this language is largely related to the twilight of Europe as the center of capitalism and the rise of the United States. Especially after World War II,

⁶ “Bikur Ha-Tizmoret”, in The Internet Movies Database (Imdb.com Inc.) available from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1032856/>; Internet; retrieved 15 June 2010.

⁷ “Before Sunrise”, in The Internet Movies Database (Imdb.com Inc.) available from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112471/>; Internet; retrieved 15 June 2010.

political and military domination were somewhat attenuated in favor of cultural domination⁸. The language is a centerpiece for this purpose. Most of the cultural products depend to a great degree on the language: the American cinema becomes the most profitable and disseminated in the world, and the same applies to American music. It is not by accident that English reached this privileged status, but it may seem so, since, unlike Esperanto, this language has never explicitly attempted to become a universal language.

Conclusion

It was shown in this brief essay that a comparison between Esperanto and English can help with the identification of some relevant issues related to the emergence and dissemination of the latter as a global language, and perhaps as a lingua franca. It is important that we consider the implications of having English as a growing second language in many nations. The emergence of English is obviously linked to the history of Europe and, in a very special way, of the USA. We cannot choose to ignore these facts, otherwise we would be reinforcing the idea that English attained its current status by accident and would also fail to understand the consequences of a situation in which native speakers of other languages have to learn English in order to take part in every aspect of our globalized society.

The positive aspects of having a language that is understood and spoken by everybody in the world are many. As it is English that seems to be the closest to achieve the position of the international auxiliary language, it is necessary to focus not only on the obvious advantages of this fact, but also on its less evident consequences. Classifying every aspect of this panorama in terms of its positiveness or negativeness is not the point; it is much more relevant for the debate to identify and describe every consequence related to the problem. And the comparison between English and Esperanto seemed to be useful for the identification of some of these consequences.

It is also fundamental that we, speakers of a fringe language such as Portuguese, understand all of the consequences entailed by having the language of a few nations progressively becoming a world language. We must understand that the communication between countries and between people will never be neutral if they choose to use the

⁸ For a history of English language, refer to Störig (1990).

language of one of them. Whether or not Esperanto would be a better alternative than English is not a relevant question for the purposes of this essay. After all, it is quite improbable that a language, be it artificial or natural, could be neutral. What is relevant for us to do is understand that the current linguistic status in the world is given, but that it does not mean it is natural or unworthy of being the object of critical questioning.

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