

INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGES

BY ALBERT LÉON GUÉRARD

AN ESPERANTO enthusiast, we are told by Paul Gsell, was descanting before Anatole France on the charm and power of his *kara lingvo*. The old master listened with the same open-minded courtesy, we may be sure, as that with which M. Bergeret listened to the *vers libre* of M. Roux. But then he asked his visitor: "Please translate for us these two lines from 'Phèdre':

*Ariane, ma cœur, de quel amour blessée
Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée!*

When the disciple of Zamenhof had offered his version, the smile of Anatole was more than ever fraught with irony and pity. "You can see for yourself, my friend," he said. "It can not be done!"

I can imagine literati the world over shaking their heads wearily, and repeating: "It can not be done!" Yet the international language problem can not be shirked, for this is a world of many nations and of tongues innumerable and illimitably vexatious. Shells, liquid fire and poisonous gases provide a means of exchanging international opinions which leaves nothing to be desired on the score of definiteness, but they still have their limitations, and even when we have nothing to say to our neighbors but "We hate and despise you!" we try to say it in more subtle terms. The international language question exists: that much is incontrovertible. Moreover, scientists are ready to tackle it: the International Research Council has a special committee for the purpose, and the Associations for the Advancement of Science in America, England and France have gone into the matter.

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Commerce is cautious, but willing: big firms already advertize and correspond in Esperanto and do so without a qualm. Even diplomats are open-minded: some of the very best men in the Assembly of the League of Nations were among those who requested that the problem be investigated. The motion was carried, and Dr. Nitobe, Assistant Secretary General, brought in a highly interesting report. Colonel George Harvey, in the rashness of his youth, opened the columns of the *North American Review* to Esperanto before he scented the taint of idealism about the scheme. The most hide-bound of scholars—*Wir Philologen*—are beginning to move: and indeed, they could hardly help it after Max Müller, A. Meillet, and Otto Jespersen had cleared the path for them. Of all men, perhaps, literary artists will be the last to wake. Anatole France has only a sceptical smile for flag, church and code, but he believes in Classical French. He believes in it as hard as the goldsmith in Molière believed in the panacean virtue of jewelry: "*Vous êtes orfèvre, Monsieur Josse.*"

Word artists must needs be traditionalists, for their material is not, like the stuff science is made of, or even like marble, bronze, clay or paint, independent of the past. The cave paintings of the Crê-Magnons, the jar portraits of ancient Peru, are immediately intelligible; a language, on the contrary, is a system of symbols of which history holds the key. If the key be lost, as in the case of Etruscan, the symbols are valueless; if the key work heavily or capriciously, the symbols become faint or distorted. Or shall we say that a vocabulary is merely a blank check

book, of small intrinsic value—that all depends upon the amount of your deposit in the bank? An unknown language, foreign or artificial, will not honor at sight the signature of a stranger. So we go back with delight to the familiar place where we can get full value, in idea and sensation, for every one of our words.

A language, we have been told a thousand times, is not a mechanism, it is a sort of life, and therefore a growth. It is the life of an individual in communion with the life of a race. It is more than the garment of our mind and the veil of our soul; are we sure, indeed, that it is not our mind itself, and a substantial part of our very soul? Divorce the human body from its life, and you get simply enough iron to make a good-size nail, enough lime to whitewash a few square feet of wall, enough fat to fry a doughnut—a stock of materials which may well be worth thirty cents. Translate religion into “practical, sensible” terms—a theological Esperanto—and all true Fundamentalists will cry: “They have taken our Lord from us!” Do the same with love, and there remains only a series of psycho-physiological reactions. Do the same with literature, and “the multitudinous sea incarnadine” becomes just a choppy sea. We understand the shudder of mystic, lover and poet before a world of mere fact and sense, bereft of that glamor which alone is life. But the problem of language is neither fully nor fairly stated in such terms. The main conflict here is not one between the weaver of dreams and the practical man, with his single devotion to hard facts; it is a conflict between the letter and the spirit. On the one hand we have the verbalist, the literalist, the dogmatist, for whom certain symbols are endowed with unique and unchanging values; on the other hand we have the progressive, who believes that life and its glamor are eternal, that they will not pass away with any particular set of symbols, that they will, on the contrary, fill to the brim any new symbol that we may devise.

We may understand the shudder of the artist before an unfamiliar instrument, but it should not be accepted as a final condemnation. A shudder may be a warning: it may also be a challenge. We should say to our trembling minds what Turenne said to his body, quaking with fear at the first thunder of battle: “Tremblest, carcass? Shalt tremble with better cause where I am going to lead thee!”

II

So, with all reverence, I beg to challenge the decision of Anatole France, the visible head of the Holy Literary Church. I claim that his pronouncement was no judgment at all, but a mere expression of prejudice. Prejudice and Anatole France seem incompatible terms, but who can boast that he is wholly free? Roosevelt tells us that, in one of his cross-country hikes, the whole party, having to ford a river, stripped and carried their clothes above their heads. Attention was called to the fact that Ambassador Jusserand had kept his gloves on. “We might meet ladies, you know,” was the Ambassador’s explanation. Anatole France’s anti-Esperantism is his last shred of respectability. He stands in splendid freedom, one of Wells’s “men like Gods,” with a pair of gloves on!

Huxley once asserted that, in order to understand a crayfish, you would first have to be a crayfish. In order to pass judgment on Esperanto,¹ one should first know Esperanto—a precaution that most critics, including Anatole France, are apt to neglect. Had I been the Esperantist he challenged, I should have felt no scruple in playing a trick upon the Master. Instead of Esperanto, I should have quoted two lines at random from some literary language with which Anatole was not acquainted—Portuguese, perhaps, or Rumanian, or, if need be, Magyar. You may be sure that his verdict would have been

¹ Throughout this article the word Esperanto is used to represent any artificial auxiliary language.

the same. He would have damned a couplet from Camoens with as much assurance as Waxahachie applauded Sarah Bernhardt when she filled gaps in her overtaxed memory with the multiplication table.

No doubt the translation offered was disappointing to the translator himself. That the full charm of a literary passage can not be transposed into a different language is a fact sadly familiar to students of foreign literatures. George du Maurier obtained the desired effect of whimsical grotesqueness when he rendered, with perfect accuracy:

Break, break, break,
On thy cold grey stones, O sea. . . .

as

Cassez-vous, cassez-vous, cassez-vous,
O mer, sur vos froids gris cailloux. . . .

But I know French scholars, not conscious humorists, who rivaled that achievement in their attempts to translate such a simple line as

Ring out, wild bells, in the wild sky.

The professional translator is appalled, indeed, at the constant lack of coincidence between the vocabularies of languages as closely related as English and French. French, for instance, has no equivalent for *boy* and *girl*. It has but one word for *strength* and *force*, one also for *love* and *like*. On the other hand, there are many shades in French that are untranslatable into English. What subtlety can you expect from a language that turns *savoir-vivre* into *good manners*, and can not properly distinguish between *arrière-pensée* and *mental reservation*? If each language were to be judged by the standard of the other, both would be found wanting.

This difficulty, which is very real even with the simplest and most direct style, increases a hundredfold when, to the fundamental notes, we add all the harmonics of a long tradition. Much of our current English is based upon the Authorized Version of the Bible. Theology and literature, meeting at exactly the right

moment, conspired to give the Book in English a sonorous beauty that it did not achieve even in the German of Luther. So the grand tropes of Hebrew and Greek have lost in our familiar speech their foreign character without losing their majesty. On the contrary, the Bible has never permeated the French language. The version of the Psalms by Marot sounds childish, and the paraphrases by Racine are too nobly classical. In consequence, many Biblical allusions which, to us, are sublime commonplaces, strike the French as almost ludicrous in their oriental strangeness. Between Ezekiel and Voltaire, as literary artists, there is no conceivable bridge. For that reason, if a British Anatole France were to pick out at random a page from Carlyle or Ruskin, and to ask a young friend to turn it into French, he would have to say: "You can see for yourself that it can not be done."

In the lines that Anatole France selected for his test, the thought and the language are simple enough. Their unique beauty resides in their passionate and subdued harmony—a *lamento* in which the hushed vowels and the prolonged feminine rhyme work on our nerves like minor chords. But France's experiment proved only the vital connection between a great poet and his language, and therefore the impossibility of translation in the highest reaches of literature. For what other reason do we still attempt to read the classics in the text, when our store of knowledge so far surpasses that of Greece and Rome? In this case, let us grant, Esperanto had failed—but did it fail more utterly than a "natural" language? There is implied in France's contention a familiar theory which is open to challenge: it is that certain words have a suggestive music of their own. I believe that this is to a great extent a delusion. If a passage from a totally unknown language is read before you with level intonation, I defy you to guess whether it is a love scene or an engineer's report. The French word *cœur*, for instance, has a sentimental softness

which, by the way, does not fit in with one of its secondary meanings, *courage*. The German word *Herz*, in contrast, would seem to the French insufferably harsh. Yet it satisfies a people long noted for the music in their souls. The word *crêpe* suggests invincibly the tragic black veil of the French widow—until you remember that it also means *pancake*. There is hardly any name of more potent appeal than *Carmen*: those six letters exhale all the passionate fragrance of old Spain. Therefore, when I first read in big headlines: “Carmen Strike,” I was greatly puzzled. Then I suddenly realized that this magic symbol could also denote more prosaic beings than Mérimée’s *gitana*. Perhaps we should have a little less faith in the blessed word *Mesopotamia*.

Is there such a thing, indeed, as an ugly language? Is Volapük itself more hideous than Magyar? If I threw before you such a word as *sgbignazzandogli*, could you tell offhand that it belongs to the most musical language heard on the lips of men? I should be ungrateful indeed if I did not feel that French culture is in the marrow of my bones. But for that very reason, I confess that I feel some impatience when people dwell too heavily upon the beauty of French as a language. It is the same kind of irritation that M. Henri Bergson must feel, when admiring whispers reach him: “He is always so neatly dressed!” If French is worth studying, it is for the quality of French thought, not for the intrinsic excellence of the instrument. It is obvious that it possesses neither the sonority of the Mediterranean languages, nor the grand massiveness of German, nor the wealth and freedom of English. The instrument be hanged! I’d rather hear a true musician perform on a Jew’s harp than a third-rate fiddler scrape a Stradivarius. I’d rather read Renan in Malagasy, Tamil or Volapük than Georges Ohnet in his native French. Anatole France’s own style is a lovely music, at the same time aerial and grave. But does the music lie in the mere words? Take one of his most

exquisite pages, transpose a score of words, and you will get something which might be signed by Henri Bordeaux, of the French Academy, the nearest Gallic equivalent of Harold Bell Wright.

III

I have no desire to deny the magic of style. If you remove the elfin light that plays round certain lines of Shelley, a spell is destroyed that no wealth of mere sense can restore. But the grandest literature does not depend upon felicities of diction, any more than the keenest wit is expressed by verbal quips. The majesty of Genesis is elemental, not stylistic: “Let there be light!” will convey the same meaning and the same impression in Hebrew, in English and in Esperanto. The quiet, searching power of the Beatitudes borrows nothing from the skilful twist of a phrase, or the fortunate arrangement of vowels and consonants. If Shakespeare has jewels five words long that fade when you take them away from the charmed circle, the fact nevertheless remains that some of his noblest passages owe little to mere form. Nothing could be less “clever” than “To be or not to be: that is the question.” Yet, with such simple words he leads us shuddering to the very brink of the abyss.

It is unprofitable to argue about beauty: beauty is a miracle, unforeseen, unexplainable, subjective, the reward of faith, not of reason. Give us accuracy to start with, and we shall be satisfied. With accuracy and nothing else, we shall be able to deal with travel, commerce, government and science—a goodly portion of the purposes that a language can serve. When, through such services, the new instrument has become familiar to our ears and our tongues, why should we not discover in it a charm of its own? Why should not a genius arise who, from two dull words unexpectedly brought together, will extract the miraculous flame? That an artificial language can be made accurate will hardly be denied, even by Anatole France.

Accuracy is the essential quality of all codes and formulæ, and a medium like Esperanto aspires at first to be nothing else. The quaintnesses in our living tongues add nothing whatever to their precision. English might have the perfect phonetic spelling of modern German, and not suffer thereby. Or it might have the simple, absolutely regular accentuation of French, and be no whit the worse for it. If all its irregularities were eliminated, where would be the loss? Would *mouses* be any less evidently plural than *mice*, or *sinked* less manifestly past than *sank*? The people who find a magic virtue in odd survivals and anomalies must deplore the fact that such verbs as *love* and *believe*, which express the deepest things in life, should be so shamefully regular.

The accuracy of a language cannot be perfected, of course, save through actual use. But Esperanto has already a sufficient background of experience to possess a remarkable degree of precision, and Ido, the descendant of Esperanto, has inherited the same quality. So we are not now speaking hypothetically, as Descartes, Leibnitz, Max Müller or Nietzsche had to do when they argued that an artificial language could be made more perfect than a natural one. With both Esperanto and Ido an interesting experiment has been performed, which leaves no doubt as to their possibilities. Passages presenting serious difficulties were translated from, let us say, German into several natural languages, and then into Esperanto and Ido. Finally, these versions were re-translated into German by other scholars who had not seen the originals. The results were then compared with the initial passages. Esperanto and Ido came out with flying colors. There was nothing surprising in this result. Our historical languages, with all their charm and splendor, are the embodiment of much ignorance and loose thinking. If there clings about certain words a fascinating fragrance of the Seventeenth Century, there clings also an odor of Seventeenth Century

prejudice. Instead of giving rough and ready, or poetic, equivalents for the idioms of the text, the Esperanto translator was compelled to analyze the author's thought.

IV

If literary artists are successful in vetoing an artificial auxiliary language, what will happen? A world that needs international organization as tragically as ours does will not indefinitely tolerate the present linguistic chaos. The problem itself will not be denied. What then? One of the living languages will be adopted for international purposes. Will it be English? Such is the solution that many men in America seem to consider both desirable and inevitable.

Inevitable—perhaps. But not without a prolonged and painful process of competition and survival. The present giant's strides of English, by peaceful means and without opposition, should not lead us to believe that the language will irresistibly sweep the world. The moment supremacy is actually claimed on its behalf, it will be resisted tooth and nail. No doubt it would be infinitely wiser for the rest of the world to accept English at once as the second language of all civilized men. But nations are passionate rather than wise. If Mexico were wise, it would long ago have turned over the difficult business of governing itself to such an expert as General Wood. The League of Nations is now bilingual. There is little doubt that at present England is much more universally trusted than France. Yet if it were moved that English be made the sole official language of the League, the motion might conceivably be supported by the Scandinavian countries and by Japan, but certainly by no other. The British are old hands at the diplomatic game. Insular as they are, they know infinitely more of foreign peoples than we do. The isolation of a tight little island can never be quite so complete as that of a self-sufficient continent like ours: our parochialism is on the same gigantic scale as our sky-scrappers and the income

of our oil magnates. That is why the attitude of Great Britain in the language question is so different from ours. England, instead of attempting to force the adoption of English exclusively on the League of Nations, favored the recognition of Spanish as co-equal with English and French.

Let us suppose, however, that English were adopted as the international language. What then? The immediate benefits would be evident enough. We would be more impregnably entrenched than ever in our good-humored contempt for wops, frogs, dagocs, heinies, polacks, and all the others who can not talk United States as correctly as Ring Lardner. This would be a tremendous advantage, for contempt is an unfailing source of delight. Why do we want to achieve distinction, if not in order that we may despise the undistinguished? Our linguistic privilege would make us the recognized aristocracy of the world. We could travel from Spitzbergen to Tierra del Fuego and meet everywhere the same dear old bill-boards, and order ham and eggs in the language of God's own country. English alone would rule the radio waves. Our best novels, which now sell by the paltry carload, would then be marketed by the trainload. It is such a dream as to make all the Babbitts swell with joy.

We should win the world—but what of our soul? It would not be lost of course—but mightn't it be a trifle cheapened? For it is not without danger that a national language can be turned to international purposes. Cosmo-English, as Mr. Hamilton calls it, would lose much of the raciness and power of just plain English. If it becomes an Esperanto, it will develop the weaknesses of Esperanto—without acquiring at the same rate the basic virtues of Esperanto. The temptation will be overwhelming to simplify it—that is to say, to denature it. There is hardly any advocate of International English who does not take one or many steps in that direction. The most moderate—Professor

Brander Matthews, if I am not mistaken—is satisfied with spelling reform, as if the objections to English would be materially weakened if we wrote *thru* instead of *through*. I am not averse to spelling reform. I signed several pledge cards with every intention of keeping my promise—in a Pickwickian sense. We should not say with Sir Hall Caine: "Shakespeare's spelling is good enough for me," since we all know that Shakespeare could not spell at all. Let us remove many obvious absurdities, by all means. But spelling reform is only the time-honored thin end of the wedge. If we adopted it, we would next be asked to tackle more boldly the fundamental problem: that of patching up the present divorce between the spoken and written word in English. The result would be a dialect sufficiently close to our standard English to be confusing and yet too different to be spontaneous. Instead of meeting the international language difficulty in our relatively rare relations with foreigners, we should have introduced it into our very homes. I am ready to wager that the adoption of such a simplified English would be resisted more bitterly by English and American artists than the adoption of Esperanto. London would not object to a railroad station being built—with due precautions—opposite Westminster Abbey, but it would certainly object to Westminster Abbey being turned into a railroad station.

International English, in brief, would no longer be our own. It is the curse of dominion: a chain is a chain, whichever end you hold. If you impose your language upon the world, the world will retaliate by denationalizing your language. English is much more than a set of words connected by grammatical forms: it is a huge collection of idioms. This is the secret of its power: for each phrase is alive, tense and colorful. But it is also the reason of its extreme difficulty for foreign students: these innumerable idioms are not logical, are not intelligible through their component terms. "Mr. Britling sees it

through" was translated into French as "*Monsieur Britling commence à voir clair*," and "If you don't enlist, I shall cut you dead" became in German: "Ich hacke dich tot!" The user of English must handle sharp tools with lightning speed: only constant practice can make the performance safe. What will happen if English is turned over to the mercies of millions whose fundamental habits of speech are radically different from ours?

The safest thing for all concerned would be if International English were made logical and analytical—that is to say, unidiomatic. The alternative will be the free use of idioms by hordes of men who, like Hashimura Togo, do not have English in their bones. They will keep conscientious notebooks of "elegant expressions," as we used to do for our Latin themes: and they will reel them off whenever they have a chance, never doubting that, the more idioms you are using, the more idiomatic your speech. We do not have to imagine what such a language would be: it exists, for the delectation of the readers of *Punch*: it is the Babu English of half-baked Hindu students. Thus a turbaned gentleman announced his mother's death with these oddly matched jewels of speech: "The hand that rocked the cradle has kicked the bucket."

V

If I were a word artist, I should therefore be strongly averse to the use of a national language—and particularly of my own—for international purposes. It imposes an unfair handicap upon the foreigners who have to use it in competition with the natives: but especially it imposes an undue strain upon the language itself—a strain which in time will impair its raciness and ruin its integrity. It is Esperanto alone that can keep English undefiled.

Artists abominate the thought of a standardized world, all of one language and of one speech, as in the days when, in the plain of Shinar, the sons of men builded their ill-fated skyscraper. A dream, and not even a beautiful dream, no doubt. But you are working for just such a dream when you want to impose upon all nations the language of one race and one civilization. The international idea deserves recognition, and must be free to grow; the national idea is dear to our souls, and must be preserved. You will best serve both by keeping them separate. Esperanto will have an ever-widening field, even in literature. But French will remain French, Irish will remain Irish, and English will remain English—thank God!

THE WAR AGAINST BIRTH CONTROL

BY MARGARET SANGER

... and priests in black gowns were walking
their rounds,
and binding with briars my joys and desires.
—*William Blake.*

“STRANGE,” exclaims a character in Aldous Huxley’s “Antic Hay,” “how long it has taken the ideas of love and procreation to dissociate themselves in the human mind. Even in this so-called Twentieth Century they are, in the majority of minds, indivisibly wedded.”

For ten years I have challenged this union of ideas, and in that turbulent period I have discovered that in this great commonwealth it is still considered “lewd, lascivious and obscene” to suggest their dissolution. When the diabolic words, Birth Control, first made their appearance in print, my obscure little journal was forbidden the mails, seven Federal indictments were lodged against me, and I was denounced, condemned and hounded out of the country. Since that time books on Birth Control have been suppressed, meetings called to discuss the underlying problem have been illegally broken up, and police officials, city councils, mayors, priests, archbishops, and other self-appointed meddlers have joined in obstructing and overriding all the constitutional guarantees of free speech. Their methods have been of infinite variety, their purposes audacious, and their organization and cohesion admirable.

These ten years of suppression and persecution have taught me many things. Despite the personal inconvenience I have undergone, I can now look with amusement and at times even with tolerance upon the incessant activities of this new

caste of thought controllers. Perhaps I really owe them a debt of gratitude, for I have come to see that they discharge a useful function in our great national pageant, enact a picturesque and perhaps even necessary rôle in our human-all-too-human comedy. Without the aid of their frenzied opposition the idea of Birth Control might never have been broadcasted to the remotest outposts of civilization.

It is not my purpose here to argue the cause of Birth Control. I wish merely to touch upon certain aspects of the psychology of these thought suppressors—aspects perhaps unfamiliar to many who have never incurred their enmity.

II

In the first place, let us recognize that in the ordinary acceptance of the term, morality is nothing but the sum total, the net residuum, of social habits, the codification of customs. Decent, conservative and altogether respectable cannibals find nothing immoral in anthropophagy. The only “immoral” person, in any country, is he who fails to observe the current folkways. Thus nothing can be so absolutely “moral,” as Samuel Butler suggested, as complete mental stagnation. To think about something new is as painful to the true conservative as to exercise an atrophied muscle. To doubt the wisdom of tradition is frowned upon. To introduce a new idea is to awaken a violent protest. More than once new inventions and discoveries of great value have been punished as crimes against the public good.