

WANTED: A WORLD LANGUAGE

BY EDWARD SAPIR

As to the theoretical desirability of an international auxiliary language there can be little difference of opinion. But as to just what factors in the solution of the problem should be allowed to weigh most heavily there is room for every possible difference of opinion, and so it is not surprising that interlinguists are far from having reached complete agreement. The crucial differences lie not so much between one constructed language and another as between the idea of a constructed language and that of an already established national one, whether in its traditional form or in some simplified form.

It is not uncommon to hear it said by those who stand somewhat outside the movement that some such regular system as Esperanto is theoretically desirable, but that it is of little use to work for it because English is already *de facto* the international language of modern times—if not altogether at the moment, then in the immediate future—, that English is simple enough and regular enough to satisfy all practical requirements, and that the precise form of it as an international language may well be left to historical and psychological factors that one need not worry about in advance. This point of view has a certain pleasing plausibility about it but, like so many things that seem plausible and effortless, it may none the less embody a number of fallacies.

There are two considerations, often intermingled in practice, which arouse the

thought of an international language. The first is the purely practical problem of facilitating the growing need for international communication in its most elementary sense. A firm, for instance, that does business in many countries is driven to spend an enormous amount of time, labor, and money in providing a translation service. All this is sheer waste. Again, at an international scientific meeting one is always disappointed to find that the difficulty of communicating with foreign scientists makes it much harder to exchange ideas than one had fancied might be the case before setting sail. Such examples might be multiplied *ad infinitum*. Sooner or later one chafes and begins to wonder whether the evil is as necessary as tradition would have it. Impatience translates itself into a desire to have something immediate done about it, and, as is generally the case with impatience, resolves itself in the easiest way that lies to hand. Why not push English, for instance, which is already spoken over a larger area than any other language of modern times and which shows every sign of spreading? But reflections of this sort, grounded in impatience as they are, look for no more worthy solution of the difficulty than a sort of minimum language, a *lingua franca* of the modern world. Those who argue in this spirit invariably pride themselves on being “practical,” and, like all “practical” people, they are apt to argue without their host.

The opposed consideration may be put in something like the following form: An international auxiliary language should serve as a broad base for every type of international understanding, which means for every type of expression of the human spirit which is of more than local interest. The exigencies of trade or travel are from this point of view merely some of the more obvious symptoms of the internationalizing of the human mind, and it would be a mistake to ask too little of an organ of international expression.

But this is not all. The modern mind tends to be more and more critical and analytical in spirit, hence it must devise for itself an engine of expression which is logically defensible at every point and which tends to correspond to the rigorous spirit of modern science. This does not mean that a constructed international language is expected to have the perfection of mathematical symbolism, but it must be progressively felt as moving in that direction. Perhaps the speakers of a national language are under profound illusions as to the logical character of its structure. Perhaps they confuse the comfort of habit with logical necessity. If this is so—and I do not see how it can be seriously doubted that it is—it must mean that in the long run the modern spirit will not rest satisfied with an international language that merely extends the imperfections and provincialisms of one language at the expense of all others.

There are also other considerations that are of importance, and among them perhaps the most obvious is the attitude of people toward the spread or imposition of any national language which is not their own. The psychology of a language which, in one way or another, is imposed upon one because of factors beyond one's control is very different from the psychology of a

language that one accepts of one's free will. In a sense, every form of expression is imposed upon one by social factors, one's own language above all. But it is the thought or illusion of freedom that is the important thing, not the fact of it.

The modern world is confronted by the difficulty of reconciling internationalism with its persistent and tightening nationalisms. More and more, unsolicited gifts from without are likely to be received with unconscious resentment. Only that can be freely accepted which is in some sense a creation of all. A common creation demands a common sacrifice, and perhaps not the least potent argument in favor of a constructed international language is the fact that it is equally foreign, or apparently so, to the traditions of all nationalities. The common difficulty gives it an impersonal character and silences the resentment that is born of rivalry.

English, as an international language, is no more secure than French has proved to be as the accepted language of diplomacy, or as Latin has proved to be as the international language of science. Both French and Latin are involved with nationalistic and religious implications which could not be entirely shaken off, and so, while they seemed for a time to have solved the international language problem up to a certain point, they did not really do so in spirit. English would probably fare no better, and it is even likely that the tradition of superficial practicality that attaches to it may, in the long run, prove more of a hindrance than a help to its acceptance.

One must beware of an over-emphasis on the word "auxiliary." It is perfectly true that for generations to come an international language must be auxiliary, must not attempt to set itself up against the many languages of the folk, but it must for all that be a free and powerful expres-

sion of its own, capable of all work that may reasonably be expected of language and protected by the powerful negative fact that it cannot be interpreted as the symbol of any nationality.

Even if it be assumed for the sake of argument that English is to spread as an auxiliary language over the whole world, it does not follow that the international language problem is disposed of. English, or some simplified version of it, may spread for certain immediate and practical purposes, yet the deeper needs of the modern world may not be satisfied by it and we may still have to deal with a conflict between an English that has won a too easy triumph and a constructed language that has such obvious advantages of structure that it may gradually displace its national rival.

What is needed above all is a language that is as simple, as regular, as logical, as rich, and as creative as possible; a language which starts with a minimum of demands on the learning capacity of the normal individual and can do the maximum amount of work; which is to serve as a sort of logical touchstone to all national languages and as the standard medium of translation. It must, ideally, be as superior to any accepted language as the mathematical method of expressing quantities and relations between quantities is to the lumbering verbal form. This is undoubtedly an ideal which can never be reached, but ideals are not meant to be reached; they merely indicate the direction of movement.

II

I spoke before about the illusions that the average man has about the nature of his own language. It will help to clarify matters if we take a look at English from the standpoint of simplicity, regularity,

logic, richness, and creativeness. We may begin with simplicity. It is true that English is not as complex in its formal structure as is German or Latin, but this does not dispose of the matter. The fact that a beginner in English has not many paradigms to learn gives him a feeling of absence of difficulty, but he soon learns to his cost that this is only a feeling, that in sober fact the very absence of explicit guide-posts to structure leads him into all sorts of quandaries.

A few examples will be useful. One of the glories of English simplicity is the possibility of using the same word as noun and verb. We speak, for instance, of "having cut the meat" and of "a cut of meat." We not only "kick a person," but "give him a kick." One may either "ride horseback" or "take a ride." At first blush this looks like a most engaging rule, but a little examination convinces us that the supposed simplicity of word-building is a mirage. In the first place, in what sense may a verb be used as a noun? In the case of "taking a ride" or "giving a kick" the noun evidently indicates the act itself. In the case of "having a cut on the head" or "eating a cut of meat," it just as clearly does not indicate the act itself but the result of the act, and these two examples do not even illustrate the same kind of result, for in the former case the cut is conceived of as the wound that results from cutting, whereas in the latter case it refers to the portion of meat which is loosened by the act of cutting.

Anyone who takes the trouble to examine these examples carefully will soon see that behind a superficial appearance of simplicity there is concealed a perfect hornet's nest of bizarre and arbitrary usages. To those of us who speak English from our earliest years these difficulties do not readily appear, but to one who comes to

English from a language which possesses a totally different structure they are most disconcerting.

Again, there is a second difficulty with the rule, or tendency, which allows us to use the unmodified verb as a noun. Not only is the function of the noun obscure but in a great many cases we cannot use it at all, or the usage is curiously restricted. We can "give a person a shove" or "a push," but we cannot "give him a move" nor "a drop" (in the sense of causing him to drop). We can "give one help," but we "give obedience," not "obey." A complete examination of all cases in which the verb functions as a noun would disclose two exceedingly cheerless facts: that there is a considerable number of distinct senses in which the verb may be so employed, though no rule can be given as to which of these possible senses is the proper one in any particular case or whether only one or more than one such meaning is possible; and that in many cases no such nouns may be formed at all, but that either nouns of an entirely different formation must be used or else that they are not possible at all. We thus have to set up such rather cranky-looking configurations as

to help: help = to obey: obedience
 = to grow: growth
 = to drown: drowning,

a set-up which is further complicated by the fact that such a word as drowning not only corresponds to such words as help and growth, but also to such words as helping and growing.

The precise disentanglement of all these relations and the obtaining of anything like assurance in the use of the words is a task of no small difficulty. Where, then, is the simplicity with which we started? It is obviously a phantom. The English-speaking person covers up the difficulty for him-

self by speaking vaguely of idioms. The real point is that behind the vagaries of idiomatic usage there are perfectly clear-cut logical relations which are only weakly brought out in the overt form of English. The simplicity of English in its formal aspect is, therefore, really a pseudo-simplicity or a masked complexity.

Another example of apparent, but only apparent, simplicity in English is the use of such vague verbs as "to put" and "to get." To us the verb put is a very simple matter, both in form and in use. Actually it is an amazingly difficult word to learn to use and no rules can be given either for its employment or for its avoidance. "To put at rest" gives us an impression of simplicity because of the overt simplicity of the structure, but here again the simplicity is an illusion. "To put at rest" really means "to cause to rest," and its apparent analogy to such constructions as "to put it at a great distance," so far from helping thought, really hinders it, for the formal analogy is not paralleled by a conceptual one. "To put out of danger" is formally analogous to "to put out of school," but here too the analogy is utterly misleading, unless, indeed, one defines school as a form of danger.

If we were to define the word put as a kind of causative operator, we should get into trouble, for it cannot be safely used as such in all cases. In such a sentence as "The ship put to sea," for example, there is no implied causative relation. If English cannot give the foreigner clear rules for the employment of verbs as nouns or for such apparently simple verbs as put, what advantage is derived by him from the merely negative fact that he has not much formal grammar to learn in these cases? He may well feel that the apparent simplicity of English is purchased at the price of a bewildering obscurity. He may even feel that

the mastery of English usage is, in the long run, much more difficult than the application of a fairly large number of rules for the formation of words, so long as these rules are unambiguous.

English has no monopoly of this pseudo-simplicity. French and German illustrate the misleading character of it just as well. One example from French will serve our purpose. There is no doubt that the French speaker feels that he has in the reflexive verb a perfectly simple and, on the whole, unambiguous form of expression. A logical analysis of reflexive usages in French shows, however, that this simplicity is an illusion and that, so far from helping the foreigner, it is more calculated to bother him.

In some cases the French reflexive is a true reflexive; that is, it indicates that the subject of the sentence is the same as the object. An example of a reflexive verb of this sort would be *se tuer*, "to kill oneself." To French feeling this sort of verb is doubtless identical with the type illustrated by *s'amuser*. Logically, however, one does not "amuse oneself" in the sense in which one "kills oneself." The possibility of translating "to amuse oneself" into "to have a good time" and the impossibility of translating "to kill oneself" into "to have a bad time killing," or something of that sort, at once shows the weakness of the analogy. Logically, of course, *s'amuser* is not a true reflexive at all, but merely an intransitive verb of the same general type as "to rejoice" or "to laugh" or "to play."

Furthermore, the French verb *se battre* gives the Frenchman precisely the same formal feeling as *se tuer* and *s'amuser*. Actually, it is a reciprocal verb which may be translated as "to strike one another" and, therefore, "to fight." Finally, in such a verb as *s'étendre*, "to extend" or "to stretch," the Frenchman distinctly feels the

reflexive force, the stretching of the road, for instance, being conceived of as a self-stretching of the road, as though the road took itself and lengthened itself out. This type of verb may be called a pseudo-reflexive, or a non-agentive, active verb, the point being that the action, while of a type that is generally brought about by an outside agency, is conceived of as taking place without definite agency.

In English, verbs of this kind are regularly used without the reflexive, as in "the road stretches," "the string breaks," "the rag tears," "the bag bursts," which are the non-agentive correspondents of such usages as "he stretches the rubber band," "he breaks the string," "he tears the rag," "he bursts the balloon." It should be clear that a linguistic usage, such as the French reflexive, which throws together four such logically distinct categories as the true reflexive, the simple intransitive, the reciprocal, and the non-agentive active, purchases simplicity at a considerable price. For the Frenchman such usage is convenient enough and no ambiguity seems to result. But for the outsider, who comes to French with a different alignment of forms in his mind, the simplicity that is offered is puzzling and treacherous.

III

These examples of the lack of simplicity in English and French, all appearances to the contrary, could be multiplied almost without limit and apply to all national languages. In fact, one may go so far as to say that it is precisely the apparent simplicity of structure which is suggested by the formal simplicity of many languages which is responsible for much slovenliness in thought, and even for the creation of imaginary problems in philosophy. What has been said of simplicity applies equally

to regularity and logic, as some of our examples have already indicated. No important national language, at least in the Occidental world, has complete regularity of grammatical structure, nor is there a single logical category which is adequately and consistently handled in terms of linguistic symbolism.

A standard international language should not only be simple, regular, and logical, but also rich and creative. Richness is a difficult and subjective concept. It would, of course, be hopeless to attempt to crowd into an international language all those local overtones of meaning which are so dear to the heart of the nationalist. But there is a growing fund of common experience and sentiment which will have to be expressed in an international language, and it would be strange if the basic fund of meanings would not grow in richness with the interactions of human beings who make use of the new medium. The supposed inferiority of a constructed language to a national one on this score is, of course, no criticism of the idea of a constructed language. All that it means is that the constructed language has not been in long-continued use. As a matter of fact, a national language which spreads beyond its own confines very quickly loses much of its original richness of content and is in no better case than a constructed language.

More important is the question of creativeness. Here there are many illusions. All languages, even the most primitive, have very real powers of creating new words and combinations of words as they are needed, but the theoretical possibilities of creation, in most of the national languages of importance for the international language question, are thwarted by all sorts of irrelevant factors that would not apply to a constructed language. English, to name one, has a great many formal re-

sources at its disposal which it seems unable to use adequately; for instance, there is no reason why the suffix *-ness* should not be used to make up an unlimited number of words indicating quality, such as smallness and opaqueness, yet we know that only a limited number of such forms is possible. One says width, not wideness; beauty, not beautifulness. In the same way, such locutions as "to give a kick" and "to give a slap" might be supposed to serve as models for the creation of an unlimited number of momentaneous verbs, yet the possibilities of extending this form of usage are strictly limited. The truth is that sentiment and precedent prevent the national language, with its accepted tradition, from doing all it might do, and the logically possible formations of all kinds which would be felt as awkward or daring in English, or even in German, could be accepted as the merest matters of course in an international language that was not tied to the dictates of irrational usage.

We see, then, that no national language really corresponds in spirit to the analytic and creative spirit of modern times. National languages are all huge systems of vested interests which sullenly resist critical inquiry. It may shock the traditionalist to be told that we are rapidly getting to the point where our national languages are almost more of a hindrance than a help to clear thinking; yet how true this is is significantly illustrated by the necessity that mathematics and symbolic logic have been under of developing their own systems of symbolism.

It is likely that the foundations of a truly adequate form of international language have already been laid in Esperanto and other proposed international auxiliary languages, but it is doubtful if the exacting ideal that I have sketched is attained by any one of them, or is likely to be attained

for some time to come. It is, therefore, highly desirable that along with the practical labor of getting wider recognition of the international language idea, there go hand in hand comparative researches which aim to lay bare the logical structures that are inadequately symbolized in our present-day languages, in order that we may see more clearly than we have yet been able to see just how much of psychological insight and logical rigor have been and can be expressed in linguistic form.

One of the most ambitious and important tasks that can be undertaken is the attempt to work out the relation between logic and usage in a number of national and constructed languages, in order that the eventual problem of adequately symbolizing thought may be seen as the problem it still is. No doubt it will be impossible, for a long time to come, to give a definitive answer to all of the questions that are raised, but it is something to raise and define the questions.

I have emphasized the logical advantages of a constructed international language, but it is important not to neglect the psychological ones. The attitude of independence toward a constructed language which all national speakers must adopt is really a great advantage, because it tends to make man see himself as the master of language instead of its obedient servant. A common allegiance to a form of expression that is identified with no single national unit is likely to prove one of the most potent symbols of the freedom of the human spirit that the world has yet known.

A further psychological advantage of a constructed language has been often referred to by those who have had experience with such languages as Esperanto. This is the removal of fear in the public use of a language other than one's native tongue. The use of the wrong gender in French or

any minor violence to English idiom is construed as a sin of etiquette, and everyone knows how paralyzing on freedom of expression is the fear of committing the slightest breach of etiquette. Who knows to what extent the discreet utterances of foreign visitors are really due to their wise unwillingness to take too many chances with the vagaries of a foreign language? Expression in a constructed language has no such fears as these to reckon with. Errors in Esperanto speech are not sins or breaches of etiquette; they are merely trivialities to the extent that they do not actually misrepresent the meaning of the speaker, and as such they may be ignored.

In the educational world there is a great deal of discontent with the teaching of classical and modern languages. It is no secret that the fruits of language study are in no sort of relation to the labor spent on teaching and learning them. Who has not the uncomfortable feeling that there is something intellectually dishonest about a course of study that goes in for a half-hearted tinkering with, say, Latin and two modern languages, with a net result that is more or less microscopic in value? A feeling is growing that the study of foreign languages should be relegated to the class of technical specialties and that the efforts of educators should be directed rather toward deepening the conceptual language sense of students in order that, thus equipped, they may as occasion arises be in a better position to learn what national languages they may happen to need.

A well-constructed international language is much more easily learned than a national language, sharpens one's insight into the logical structure of expression in a way that none of these does, and puts one in possession of a great deal of lexical material which can be turned to account in the analysis of both the speaker's lan-

guage and of most others that he is likely to want to learn. Certain beginnings have already been made toward the adoption of international language study as a means toward general language work. Time alone can tell whether this movement is a fruitful one, but it is certainly an aspect of the international language question that is worth thinking about, particularly in America, with its growing impatience of the largely useless teaching of Latin, French, German, and Spanish in the high-schools.

The international language movement has had, up to the present time, a somewhat cliquish or esoteric air. It now looks as though it might take on the characteristics of an international Open Forum. The increasing degree to which linguists, mathematicians and scientists have been thinking about the problem is a sign that promises well for the future. It is a good thing that the idea of an international language is no longer presented in merely

idealistic terms, but is more and more taking on the aspect of a practical or technological problem and of an exercise in the cleaning up of the thought process.

The spirit of logical analysis should in practice blend with the practical pressure for the adoption of some form of international language, but it should not allow itself to be stampeded by it. It would be exceedingly unfortunate if an international language, whether Esperanto or English or some form of simplified English, were looked upon as thenceforth sacred and inviolate. No solution of the international language problem should be looked upon as more than a beginning toward the gradual evolution, in the light of experience and at the hand of all civilized humanity, of an international language which is as rich as any now known to us, is far more creative in its possibilities, and is in its structure infinitely simpler, more regular, and more logical than any one of them.

GRANDMA GINGERSNAP

BY CHARLES SAMPSON

THERE was always a big bag of gingersnaps in her room, soft and mushy and stale. She had a curious passion for coal-oil, too, and peppermint sticks; and to keep her eighty-year-old body warm, alcohol.

In an age of electricity, she persisted in reading by an oil lamp. When her old joints grew stiff, she rubbed them with coal-oil, and if she had a chest cold or sore throat, she took a drop of it on a lump of sugar. She smelled of the stuff.

Once a week she walked from her son's house down a long hill into the city, paid visits to the hidden cubbyholes and mouldering homes of relatives and friends as old as herself, and walked the four miles back again with her supply of gingersnaps and peppermint sticks replenished. Throughout the week she took other long walks; she did not like to ride. Each Saturday her coal-oil can appeared among the family groceries, and on the first of every month a truck delivered a case of Overholt or Guckenheimer.

Family whispers had it that the old lady was a love child, daughter of a vagabond Black Irishman who begot her in Pennsylvania somewhere near the Maryland line. In early womanhood she had been a school-teacher, and apparently a good one, for as late as 1918—the year of her death—bent old men who had been her pupils used to call with little gifts of stuffed dates, and cookies, and the striped candy sticks she loved so well.

Her eyes were a sparkling black, as her hair was said to have once been, and they had the bright, interested look of a sage old bird. Her nose was large, Semitic in its arch, and heightening the birdlike aspect of the upper face, yet the nostrils were finely cut and delicate beyond all suggestion of coarseness. There was a quaint humor in the lines of her mouth, which was well set above a wide, spade-shaped chin. In youth, according to her only son, she had been a handsome woman.

There was a strange tale about her husband, a toy importer who had vanished in the late fifties when their boy was a few years old. He went South, the yarn said, to visit a sister who lived in the forlorn Louisiana parish of Calcasieu. After a month or two word came North that he had died and been buried. Both snakebite and yellow fever were vaguely blamed, but because of differences between the two families—and probably because the widow didn't care—no effort was made to obtain a death certificate or proof of burial.

At any rate, Grandma Gingersnap's son talked in the early 1900's to a queensware dealer who swore he had seen the old man, dodderingly alive and in the toy business in England. A spiritualist was immediately consulted, and she obligingly reported "an old, old man, surrounded by children's playthings." A subsequent trance, capping unsuccessful efforts to find the exact spot where the old, old man plied his transplanted toy trade, revealed that he had