

The Universal Language and Bilingualism

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In His book of laws, the Kitab-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh enjoins "the selection of a single language and the adoption of a common script for all on earth to use." This is "an injunction which, when carried out, would, as He Himself affirms in that Book, be one of the signs of the 'coming of age of the human race'(1)."

This injunction is repeated in the tablets of Bahá'u'lláh on at least five occasions. In four of them, the Tablets of Bishráát, Lawh-i-dunyá, Ishráqát and Lawh-i-maqsúd, Bahá'u'lláh employs almost the exact same words: "*Languages must be reduced to one common language to be taught in all the schools of the world(2).*" In three of these texts, He makes it clear that a committee of scholars is to gather to choose one language from among those now existing or to adopt a new one, and in like manner, to select a common script, both of which should be taught in all the schools of the world(3).

In one of these tablets, the Lawh-i-Maqsúd, He reveals that the selection of this universal language is one of "*the prerequisites of the peace and tranquillity of the world and the advancement of its peoples(4).*" In this tablet, which is also quoted in Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (CXVII), Bahá'u'lláh describes the establishment of a universal language and script as part of a world unification process that will begin with the "*holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men*" in which the "*rulers and kings of the earth must needs . . . consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men(5).*"

The purpose of this paper is to examine the social and psychological implications of the adoption of such a universal language, particularly in light of current research on bilingualism. To facilitate understanding of the discussion, the argument will be prefaced by a brief discussion of the nature of bilingualism and the selection of a working definition of this term.

The Nature of Bilingualism: The commonly held conception of a bilingual person is someone who is able to speak two languages perfectly. If one stops to consider what speaking a language "perfectly" might entail, however, one soon realizes that this is next to impossible. Even the most erudite, widely-read native speaker of a language would probably have some areas of the language with which he would be unfamiliar -- legal terms, technical terms, sports terms -- or terms relating to household utensils or such skills as knitting and sewing.

In fact, estimates by linguists on the receptive vocabulary range of monolingual adult speakers of English range widely, one linguist putting it between 10,000 to 50,000 words, another placing it between 200,000 and 250,000 words(6). What is clear from such estimates, however, is that the average monolingual is familiar with only a portion of his native language. Thus, it is virtually impossible to speak even one language "perfectly".

People who speak two languages, on the other hand, often have areas in which they are better at one than the other because of the places or ways in which the languages were acquired. For example, if one language was learned at home and the other in school, it may be easier to express emotions in the home language and to discuss scholarly matters in the school language. A 1964 study of Japanese-English bilinguals in the United States bears this out. In this study, Ervin-Tripp "found that speech was disrupted when the bilinguals were asked to speak in English about Japanese topics to Japanese interlocutors(7)."

Bilinguals may also have problems with "accent". Those who acquire a second language

later in life tend to speak it with an accent that is partially carried over from their native tongue. Some may say that this proves that they have not mastered the second language. But what of the case of the novelist Joseph Conrad, whose works such as "Heart of Darkness" are held up as examples of fine English writing in many American high schools? Born in Poland, Conrad achieved "excellent command of written English but apparently always spoke it with a strong Polish accent(8)." The same may well have been true of the famous Japanese novelist Natsume Soseki, whose English diary is truly poetic, but who apparently was very withdrawn during his stay in England.

Since there is a great deal of variation between bilinguals in terms of their degrees of proficiency, alternation and interference between their languages, linguists do not agree on a definition of bilingualism. In 1933, Bloomfield defined it as "native-like control of two languages", while in 1953, Haugen stated that "bilingualism begins when the speaker of one language can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language." In 1964, Diebold even went so far as to use the term "incipient bilingualism" to characterize the initial stages of contact between two languages"(9).

This paper will adopt a position between these two extremes: the approach suggested by Mackey in 1968, which considers "bilingualism as simply the alternate use of two or more languages(10)."

A Universal Language and Bilingualism: The phenomenon of bilingualism may appear to be completely unrelated to the principle of establishing a universal language. The writings quoted in the introduction to this paper may give the impression that Bahá'u'lláh's vision involves the establishment of a single language once the nations of the world have come together to halt war.

It must be recognized, however, that `Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's son and the appointed interpreter of His teachings, explained this principle in a talk given in Paris in the fall of 1912 in the following manner:

One of the great steps towards universal peace would be the establishment of a universal language. Bahá'u'lláh commands that the servants of humanity should meet together, and either choose a language which now exists, or form a new one. This was revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas forty years ago. It is there pointed out that the question of diversity of tongues is a very difficult one. There are more than eight hundred languages in the world, and no person could acquire them all. The races of mankind are not isolated as in former days. Now, in order to be in close relationship with all countries it is necessary to be able to speak their tongues. A universal language would make intercourse possible with every nation. Thus it would be needful to know two languages only, the mother tongue and the universal speech. The latter would enable a man to communicate with any and every man in the world! A third language would not be needed. To be able to talk with a member of any race and country without requiring an interpreter, how helpful and restful to all! (11)

Thus, as explained by `Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's concept of a universal language does not involve the abandonment of local languages. Everyone would maintain their mother tongue while learning the universal language in school. This is why it is often referred to as an "auxiliary" language. For, upon the adoption of such a language, everyone, or nearly everyone, in the world would start using two languages.

Of course, if an existing language were chosen to be the universal language, the native speakers of that language would not have to learn a second tongue. But even if the language

spoken by the largest number of people in the world today -- Mandarin Chinese -- were chosen, it would be the language of no more than one-quarter of humanity (and not always the native language at that, since many Chinese learn Mandarin as their second language). The remaining 75% of the world's population would therefore have to become bilingual.

Moreover, all languages that are widespread today have various dialects. This is true not only of English, which varies from region to region within England and America but also from country to country around the globe. Arabic also varies according to country, and even Japanese differs according to the region of the country.

Thus, the language situation after the adoption of a universal auxiliary language would be much like that of Japanese today. In the same way that all Japanese can communicate using standard Japanese, but prefer their own dialect in daily conversation with people from their own area, so, too, would people maintain their own language and dialect for use among people who understood them, while employing the universal tongue to communicate with others.

Initial Sacrifices: One of the most obvious benefits of the establishment of such a universal auxiliary language would be the financial savings inherent in eliminating the need for translation and interpreting between the world's myriad languages. In 1989 in Japan alone, the Electronics Industry Association of Japan estimated that the size of the translation market was ¥800,000,000,000 (approx. \$5.6 billion)(12). Within the European Community, every EC document is translated into each of the nine official languages for a total of approximately 800,000 pages of documentation a year. Interpreting in the 72 language directions between these nine languages is an equally costly undertaking. Together, translation and interpreting account for one-third of the annual EC budget, while one-third of the EC bureaucracy is occupied with language-related work(13).

It should be recognized however, that, while the establishment of a universal language would eventually lead to the elimination of the need for most of the translating and interpreting carried out today, it would initially involve extensive investment. Not only would there be expenses in choosing or developing a language, but thereafter, every school in the world would have to provide teachers and materials to give instruction to everyone who needed to learn the language. Of course, language instruction could be provided via national and international broadcasting systems, and countries could cooperate in developing and printing materials to keep costs down. Nonetheless, the establishment of this system would involve a major investment.

In addition to the economic sacrifices this transition would require of society at large, the adoption of an auxiliary language would also involve some personal sacrifice. In order to obtain the ability to communicate with everyone else in the world, every person on earth would have to devote time and energy to mastering a second language.

This might appear to be a Sisyphean task to a monolingual person, but in fact, much of humanity today already manages to handle two or more languages. While there are no precise figures available as to the number and distribution of bilinguals in the world, in 1982, Grosjean estimated that about half of the world's population was bilingual and "that bilingualism is present in practically every country in the world(14)." Mackey also stated that "bilingualism, far from being exceptional, is a problem which affects the majority of the world's population.(15)"

Bilingualism as a Social Problem: Nonetheless, research on the social aspects of bilingualism does not paint a bright picture of this phenomena in today's social systems. Bilingualism is traditionally the result of languages in contact, in many cases because one group of people has moved to an area where another language is spoken. In such cases, the immigrants are usually forced to learn the language of the dominant group in the new area in order to survive economically. If the group settles in the region permanently, it often loses its language and cultural identity in a generation or two -- as can be seen in the case of many third-generation Korean residents in Japan. Thus, "it has often been said that bilingualism is a step along the road to linguistic extinction(16)."

Although bilingual communities sometimes remain stable, as in the case of the speakers of Swiss German, and new languages such as Yiddish and various pidgins and creoles sometimes emerge as a means of communication between two language groups, minority languages often die out. In her book entitled Bilingualism, Suzanne Romaine states that

Many smaller languages are dying out due to the spread of a few world languages such as English, French, Chinese, etc. . . . Grosjean (1982:4) estimates that 11 languages are spoken by about 70 percent of the world's population. Lieberman, Dalto and Johnston (1975) found that there was an overall decline in linguistic diversity in the 35 nations which they studied. In this respect, the majority of the world's languages are minority languages. (p. 39)

The decline in the world's linguistic diversity is partially due to economics, but also in many cases, a result of government policy, since differences in language can be seen as barriers to national unity. Dominant groups, viewing language as a means of developing a sense of unity as well as promoting communication, often try to regulate language use. This has been attempted several times in the United States, most recently by the effort to declare English the official language in several states(17).

In Japan, the Ainu language has virtually died out as a result of various government policies adopted since the Meiji Restoration (1868). In the early Meiji Era, the government began listing the Ainu people in family registries using Japanese-style names. It also enforced a policy of assimilation based on encouraging the Ainu to engage in agriculture and receive a Japanese education. Ainu traditions such as male earrings and female tattoos, as well as their methods of hunting and fishing were prohibited despite Ainu opposition, while the use of the Japanese language and writing system were promoted. By 1916, just under 94% of the Ainu children attended Japanese schools(18). As a result, today only a few elderly people in Hokkaido remember the Ainu language they learned in their youth, mentioning it only occasionally and chanting it in ceremonies designed to preserve their culture, but no longer using it as an everyday means of communication(19).

Thus, in the name of national unity and assimilation, languages can be forced out of existence and bilingualism brought to an end. Moreover, bilingualism is not only perceived as a barrier to national unity, it can also be seen to bring with it a certain stigma. Those who speak two languages are often perceived by monolinguals as being somehow "deviant". In matched-guise experiments, it has been shown that monolinguals in dominant groups, as well as bilinguals themselves, tend to evaluate the same person as less intelligent, less interesting, a worse person, etc., when speaking the minority language than when speaking the dominant language(20).

Thus, in the context of present-day society, bilingualism is seen as a problem rather than a resource. At least one of the major objections to bilingualism, however, could be solved by

the adoption of a universal auxiliary language. Bilingualism, in the form of retention of minority languages, need not be a barrier to large-scale communication and national unity if a universal language is adopted.

Preserving Knowledge and Self-Esteem: To eliminate the stigmatization of bilingualism, however, the application of another Bahá'í principle would seem essential. To create an atmosphere in which speakers of minority languages do not have to feel apologetic requires the kind of appreciation of differences embodied in the Bahá'í concept of "unity in diversity". If the world valued cultural differences for the myriad insights various cultures give humanity, minorities would be able to take pride in maintaining their language and culture. Just as today's environmentalists are spending great sums to preserve the diversity of the earth's flora and fauna, the anthropologists in a more tolerant tomorrow may well exert great efforts to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity.

Such a trend appears to be emerging. The September 21, 1991 issue of Time Magazine featured an article entitled "Lost Tribes, Lost Knowledge," which emphasized the many technologies and arts that "the estimated 15,000 cultures remaining on earth" have produced. While explaining some of the medicinal, agricultural, ecological and hunting knowledge possessed by various indigenous peoples, the article introduces various groups and individuals who are striving to help tribes maintain their cultures and preserve these "troves of wisdom". For example, the article states that

Michael Balick, director of the New York Botanical Garden's Institute of Economic Botany, notes that only 1,100 of the earth's 265,000 species of plants have been thoroughly studied by Western scientists, but as many as 40,000 may have medicinal or undiscovered nutritional value for humans. Many are already used by tribal healers, who can help scientists greatly focus their search for plants with useful properties. (p. 43).

In addition to knowledge of local plants, many tribes have also developed agricultural techniques suited specifically to their local ecosystems -- an important asset in this day of waxing environmental concerns.

Yet such tribal cultures are being lost at a startling pace as increasing numbers of indigenous peoples abandon or are stripped of their native lands. For example, on the island of Borneo in Malaysia, as many as 10,000 members of the Penan tribe were estimated to have been living a traditional life in the early 1980s. Since the logging industry began destroying their woodlands, however, their numbers have dwindled to fewer than 500. Similarly, of the 270 tribes that were known to have existed in Brazil around the turn of the century, 90 have completely disappeared and more than two-thirds of the remaining tribes have populations of fewer than 1,000. (p. 40)

As members of tribes lose their lands and move to the cities, they forget the knowledge of their elders. Members of the Penan tribe in Malaysia who have moved to towns know that their elders used to watch for a certain butterfly that signalled a large number of boar for hunting, but many can no longer remember which butterfly it is. (p. 40).

Moreover, as tribes disappear, so do their languages. The article states:

A recent study by Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist Ken Hale estimates that 3,000 of the world's 6,000 languages are doomed because no children speak them. Researchers estimate that Africa alone has 1,800 languages, Indonesia 672 and New

Guinea 800. If a language disappears, traditional knowledge tends to vanish with it, since individual language groups have specialized vocabularies reflecting native people's unique solutions to the challenges of food gathering, healing and dealing with the elements in their particular ecological niche. Hale estimates that only 300 languages have a secure future. (pp. 40 - 41)

The article points out that "knowledge also disappears because the young who are in contact with the outside world have embraced the view that traditional ways are illegitimate and irrelevant." Thus, it is important for all mankind to realize the value of its diverse cultures and preserve them and the knowledge they have produced.

The universal auxiliary language may help do that by enabling nations to achieve linguistic unity without forcing minority groups to give up their own languages. When coupled with the principle of unity in diversity, then, the adoption of an auxiliary language may actually preserve knowledge for mankind as well as self-respect for the individual.

Cognitive Benefits of Bilingualism: In addition to such social and personal benefits, mankind may stand to make other gains as a result of the bilingualism that would result from the adoption of a universal auxiliary language. In their 1989 work Bilinguality and Bilingualism, which describes and analyzes virtually all of the research that had been carried out in the field to date, Hamers and Blanc state that, while the evidence is not yet conclusive, it suggests a number of cognitive advantages linked to bilingual experience.

The researchers mention that a few studies have shown an intellectual handicap connected to bilingualism. Tsushima and Hogan, for example, in 1975 "found lower scores on tests of verbal ability among 10-11-year-old Japanese-English bilinguals than among monolinguals matched for non-verbal intelligence." (p. 51)

Many more studies, however, indicate positive consequences of bilingual experience. In 1962, Peal and Lambert compared English-French bilingual children in Montreal with their monolingual counterparts in each language and found that the bilinguals scored higher on tests of both verbal and non-verbal intelligence(21). Since that time, Hamers and Blanc state that

... numerous empirical studies in different countries and with different language combinations have detailed various aspects of the cognitive advantages of the bilingual child; greater ability in reconstructing perceptual situations (Balkan, 1970, with French-English bilinguals); superior results on verbal and non-verbal intelligence, verbal originality and verbal divergence tests (Cummins & Gulutsan, 1974, with English-Ukrainian bilinguals in Western Canada); a greater sensitivity to semantic relations between words (Ianco-Worrall, 1972, with English-Afrikaans bilinguals; Cummins, 1978, with English-Irish bilinguals); higher scores on Piagetian concept-formation tasks (Liedtke & Nelson, 1968, with English-German bilinguals); and better performance in rule-discovery tasks (Bain, 1975, with English-French bilinguals in Western Canada; Bain & Yu, 1978, with French-Alsatian bilinguals in France, German-English bilinguals in Germany and English-French Canadian bilinguals in Germany).

Bilinguals also show a greater degree of divergent thinking (Scott, 1973, with French-English bilinguals in Montreal; Carringer, 1974 with English-Spanish bilinguals). In the same vein, Torrance, Gowan, Wu & Aliotti (1970) found Chinese-English bilingual children in Singapore to be superior to monolinguals on

originality and elaboration tests of the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. Gorrell, Bregman, McAllistair & Lipscombe (1982) found that Spanish-English and Vietnamese-English bilinguals outdid monolinguals on traditional psychometric school tests (WTSC-R Block Design). Ben-Zeev (1972; 1977a) observed that English-Hebrew bilinguals had a greater facility in solving non-verbal perceptual tasks and in performing group tasks. Bilinguals are also better in verbal-transformation and symbol-substitution tasks (Ekstrand, 1980, with Swedish-Finnish bilinguals). To sum up, the cognitive advantages linked to bilingual experience seems to be mainly at the level of a higher creativity and reorganization of information. Further, some recent research indicates that the cognitive advantages of bilinguality might extend to non-verbal tasks. Powers & Lopez (1985), for example, observed that 4-year-old bilinguals outperform monolinguals not only in following complex instructions but also in perceptual-motor coordination.

... several authors have demonstrated that even when bilinguals and monolinguals are equated for cognitive functioning, the former may possess better verbal abilities. (pp.49 - 50)

Although Hamers and Blanc state that this evidence is not conclusive, it certainly seems to suggest that the use of two languages may enhance creativity and mental flexibility.

Thus, the adoption of a universal auxiliary language as outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá would seem to be a big step for mankind in many ways. Although certain short-term sacrifices would be required, in the long run, such a system promises not only greater international understanding, but also greater access to the knowledge of all mankind, as well as enhanced cognitive development for us all.

Postscript: Unfortunately, one injunction of Bahá'u'lláh does not fit into the argument presented above. In the *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih*, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

We have formerly ordained that people should converse in two languages, yet efforts must be made to reduce them to one, likewise the scripts of the world, that men's lives may not be dissipated and wasted in learning divers languages. Thus the whole earth would come to be regarded as one city and one land(22).

Given the fact that, some 19 years after Bahá'u'lláh's passing, His son and appointed interpreter described the universal language as an auxiliary language to be used in addition to one's mother tongue, it is difficult to interpret this passage as advocating an immediate elimination of all tongues other than the universal language. It may be possible to interpret it to mean that efforts to reduce the world's languages to one are not obligatory, but only recommendable.

It would seem more logical, however, to assume that this is a step to be taken at a later time, after mankind has already gleaned the troves of wisdom that lie hidden in its myriad languages and cultures by translating them into the universal language. Given the advantages of bilingualism described above, at the very least, for those of us privileged enough to see the adoption of the universal language, the effort and expense involved in learning another language should prove to be well worth the challenge.

 Notes

- (1) Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 211.
- (2) Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, (Lawh-i-Dunyá), p. 89.
- (3) Ibid., (Ishráqát), p. 127.
- (4) Ibid., p. 165.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Yamamoto Masayo, in a presentation on bilingualism given to the Nara Chapter of the Japan Association of Language Teachers on November 11, 1990.
- (7) Suzanne Romaine, Bilingualism, p. 30.
- (8) Ibid., p. 12
- (9) Ibid., p. 10.
- (10) Ibid., p. 11.
- (11) `Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 155 - 156.
- (12) Quoted by W. Lise in the JAT Bulletin, Number 51, June 1989, p. 11.
- (13) Florian Coulmas, One Man's View: A European Perspective on East and West (Articles collected from The Japan Times), Asahi Press, Tokyo, 1990, pp. 73 - 74)
- (14) Romaine, op. cit., p. 8.
- (15) As cited by Romaine, op. cit., p. 8.
- (16) Romaine, op. cit., p. 5.
- (17) In 1986, the State of California actually passed a proposition that amended its state constitution to state, in part, that "English is the official language of the State of California." Quoted in Language Diversity: Problem or Resource, p. 20
- (18) Encyclopedia Nipponica 2001, Vol. 1, pp. 50 - 51.
- (19) Ibid., p. 61.
- (20) Reported in Bilinguality and Bilingualism, p. 130.
- (21) Ibid., p. 49.
- (22) Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 68.

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