

The Universal Language from the Baha'i Perspective

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In Europe linguistic diversity is presenting many challenges in business, politics and other arenas of society, as attested by Crystal's description (1997) of the language confusion at the European Union, which he terms "EU Babel,"

Nowhere does the foreign language barrier exist so markedly as in the offices of the European Union. In 1994, the Joint Interpreting and Conference Service in Brussels, which serves many agencies and institutions of the EU, was providing 120,000 interpreter days (at a cost of 70 million ecu), and with 400 full-time staff and about 300 free-lancers had become the largest interpreting service in the world. From 1995 the task increased again, with member states using 11 official languages in their work, and presenting a translation problem involving a theoretical 110 language pairs. In the 9-language days of the early 1990's, the EU institutions were already translating over 3 million words a day.

At the United Nations, six languages are designated as official languages: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Arabic. According to one Canadian ambassador to the UN, the atmosphere at the UN is such that no one wishes to talk about choosing one language as the universal language. In Japan, English is one of the fundamental skills required for all students and workers in many fields. Late Prime Minister Obuchi's proposal to adopt English as an official second language of Japan was the first case of a voluntary adoption of any foreign language as an official language. And yet the nation was divided into two opposing views on this proposal.¹ Some people contend that it is the translation experts' job to bridge the diverse language communities and that it is not realistic for common people to master two languages. However, translation does not always convey the subtle nuances and information and emotions are usually filtered and sometimes even distorted.² Since there are several thousand languages in the world today, the need for a universal language is self-evident. Nevertheless, the world seems not to be able to come to an agreement on choosing one language for the common mode of communication. Such is the linguistic state of the world.

In His Most Holy Book, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, Baha'u'llah exhorts the leaders of the world to do the following:

O members of parliaments throughout the world! Select ye a single language for the use of all on earth, and adopt ye likewise a common script. God, verily, maketh plain for you that which shall profit you and enable you to be independent of others. He, of a truth, is the Most Bountiful, the All-Knowing, the All-Informed. This will be the

¹ For example, the *Mainichi Interact* (2001) collected 395 on-line votes from the public, of which 93 (24%) were in favor, 93 (24%) were against, and 204 (52%) were neutral.

² For a detailed discussion of this point, refer to the author's study published in the previous ABS-Japan Proceedings (11th conference).

cause of unity, could ye but comprehend it, and the greatest instrument for promoting harmony and civilization, would that ye might understand! We have appointed two signs for the coming of age of the human race: the first, which is the most firm foundation, We have set down in other of Our Tablets, while the second hath been revealed in this wondrous Book. (*Kiyab-i-Aqdas*, paragraph #189)

As Baha'u'llah states in the above passage, the international language holds one of the greatest keys to prosperity of humankind, which is the theme of the present conference. It seems, therefore, most befitting, in terms of the present conference theme of "Prosperity of Mankind," to examine what this universal language will be, how it will be selected and when it will be realized based on the Baha'i Writings as well as scientific research findings.³

What Will the International Language Be?

In former Epistles We have enjoined upon the Trustees of the House of Justice *either 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. Thus will the earth be regarded as one country and one home. (*Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 127-128) (*italics and bold type added*)

It is incumbent upon all nations to appoint some men of understanding and erudition to convene a gathering and through joint consultation *choose one language from among the varied existing languages, or create a new one*, to be taught to the children in all the schools of the world. (*Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 165-166) (*italics and bold type added*)

The Baha'i Teachings do not specify what language is to be selected as a universal language. Instead, a broad framework is provided. The first possibility is choosing one from the existing languages, a natural language. The second is inventing a new one, an artificial language. Let us look at each option separately.

1.1 Some examples of "international languages" from the past

Latin was a common language for Europe during the Medieval Age especially in the fields of religion, medicine, philosophy and other sciences. Many of the scientific terms in English, especially medical terms, come from Latin. Like Latin, Greek was a language of science and scholarship for Europe, especially for those who studied ancient Greek philosophy. Chinese was the common language for scholars in the East Asia for centuries. Spanish is spoken in Middle and Latin Americas. French was used as the common tongue for European diplomacy

³ There have been a few studies addressing this theme from a Baha'i perspective. E.g., "Whither the international auxiliary language?" by Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew (*The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, Volume 2, Number 2, 1989) and "The universal language and bilingualism" by Mary Noguichi ("Proceedings from the 1st Annual Conference of the Association for Baha'i Studies-Japan, 1991").

during the 18th and 19th centuries. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, once wondered whether to write his communications to the Baha'is in the West in French or in English, before he finally decided to do this in English. French was that powerful a language until the early 20th century. Arabic is the language for Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa. In regards to Arabic, former and late Universal House of Justice member Adib Taherzadeh wrote:

In this Tablet [*Nafahat-i-Quds*, pp. 5-8] Baha'u'llah praises the Arabic language for its expressiveness and eloquence and remarks that no other language can match its vast possibilities. He further states that God would be pleased if all the peoples of the world were to speak the Arabic language. But... He leaves the choice to the appropriate institutions." (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, Vol. 4, p.160)

Persian is another language of recent divine revelation, which Baha'u'llah calls "a sweet tongue." Abdu'l-Baha talks about Persian as follows:

Acquire the Persian tongue so as to learn of the meanings of the divine words and to know the divine mysteries, to develop an eloquent speech and to translate the blessed Tablets of Baha'u'llah. The Persian language shall become noteworthy in this Cycle; nay, rather the people shall study it in all the world. (Abdu'l-Baha: *Lights of Guidance*, #1143, p. 340)

English is the most widely spread language in human history as we know it. The number of its native speakers is estimated to be between 320 and 380 million (Crystal, 1997). This circle of users is called the "inner circle" of English speakers (e.g., UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada). The "outer circle" of users are those who speak English as an official language (in addition to their native tongue); the number is estimated to be 300 to 500 million (e.g., India, Singapore). The "expanding circle" of users refer to those who speak or study English as a foreign language, whose number is between 500 and 1,000 million (e.g., China, Russia, Japan). The total of these users amounts to almost two billion. This is a very large number of speakers of one language. In a sense, it is unprecedented. Thus, English can truly be called a "global language."

The most striking characteristics of English usage in this age are that the number of its users in the outer and expanding circles exceed that of the inner circle and the sense of ownership of English is transcending that of the inner circle. As a result, there are now distinct variations of English in these regions of the world called "World Englishes" (Crystal, 1997, 2003). This phenomenon implies that the people's need and desire for a common tongue is so strong that they are taking over the ownership of the language of one country (i.e., UK). This is truly an amazing event in human history.

On the other hand, the number of non-users of English is about two thirds of the world's population. In this sense, English is not thoroughly spread all over the world. In fact, rejection of English can be seen in many countries. For example, in former colonies of the UK, such as Kenya, Tanzania, Malaysia and India, English is rejected because of the negative experience

of being forced to adopt English and abandon the native tongues. In Latin America (Spanish-speaking countries), North Africa (Arabic), and other regions (Russian, Hindi and German), economic limitations in investments force these countries to choose their national language over English for language planning priority. In countries like France, French-speaking Canada, Japan, Germany, Mexico and Myanmar, English is rejected because of intelligibility and identity issues (Crystal, 1997, 2003). Thus, although there are several outstanding candidates for a universal language amongst the existing languages, they still pose some difficulty because of political strife, economic factors, or linguistic limitations. This is why new languages have been created.

1.2. An artificial language

Is it possible to create a new language? Yes, we already have many examples like musical notes, computer languages and sign languages. These are, of course, much simpler than the natural languages we use daily. However, there have already been numerous attempts to create new languages for daily usage: Volapuk (Schleyer, 1880), Esperanto (Zamenhof, 1887), Idiom Neutral (Rosenberger, 1902), Latino Sine Flexione (Peano, 1903) and Ido (1907), to name just a few.

What are some of the advantages of artificial language? For example, we can create languages with perfectly regular rules, spellings and pronunciation, which make it easy to learn. They can be neutral politically and ideologically. How about disadvantages? Artificial languages do not have a tradition, a history or a culture when they are first developed. They are unfamiliar, which makes them difficult to approach. So it is difficult to motivate the masses to learn them. There may also be linguistic bias. And monitoring their development can be challenging. For these reasons, modifying existing languages according to the concept of an artificial language is another possibility. For example, Basic English developed by Ogden (1930) is a modified language consisting of 850 elementary English words.

1.3 Implications

At this point, the most likely scenario is that English will continue to be used as a working global language. The growing number of its users in the expanding circle supports this trend. The ownership of English is no longer confined to the inner circle or even to the outer circle. In the most immediate future, English is the most likely candidate for the universal language. Whether it will be adopted as the one official universal language by the United Nations, or whether it will continue to be used as a global language into the distant future is another story. In the long run, the possibility of another language, including an artificial language, is something no one can deny completely.

How Will It Be Adopted?

Baha'u'llah suggests two possibilities: The governments of the world or the Universal House of Justice.

2.1. Governments of the world

Members of parliaments throughout the world! Select ye a single language for the use of all on earth, and adopt ye likewise a common script. (*Kitab-i-Aqdas*, paragraph #189)

It is incumbent upon all nations to appoint some men of understanding and erudition to convene a gathering and through joint consultation choose one language from among the varied existing languages, or create a new one, to be taught to the children in all the schools of the world. (*Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 165-166)

One possible scenario is that the United Nations or a future world government will adopt a universal language. At this point, however, it does not seem that the United Nations is ready to adopt one or even talk about it.⁴ Another is that a world summit on the universal language will be held and the governments of the world, if not all of them, than most of them, will gather, consult and agree on the universal language. The participating governments will sign a treaty on this matter.⁵

2.2. The Universal House of Justice

We have enjoined upon the Trustees of the House of Justice either 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. Thus will the earth be regarded as one country and one home. (*Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp.127-128)

When the present author wrote to the Universal House of Justice in regard to the adoption of the international language, its reply implied the necessity and importance, for the time being, to continue to provide translation service.⁶ Even now, there does not seem any sign of legislating upon this subject on the part of the Universal House of Justice.

⁴ One Canadian ambassador to the UN commented that nobody wanted to talk about the subject of selecting a single official language for the UN, let alone for the world (from a talk given at the Maxwell International Baha'i School, October, 1998).

⁵ In 1992, a world summit on the environment was held in Brazil, where representatives of the world gathered and consulted upon ways and means to prevent further damage of the resources of the earth and to protect the earth. Why not hold a similar summit on language to discuss how we can unify the mode of communication? Yet, as mentioned in footnote (4), even the United Nations representatives feel sensitive about this issue. How and when will we feel comfortable enough or desperate enough to talk about it?

⁶ Letter addressed to the present author, 1991.

2.3. Implications

Since the application of Baha'i laws to the generality of society depends upon the acceptance of the Baha'i teachings on the part of the society, this law may need to wait until the time when the authority of the Universal House of Justice is widely recognized.⁷ In other words, these two types of statements—one referring the matter to the governments of the world and the other to the Universal House of Justice—may refer to the two stages of the process of adopting the universal language. The former may take place in the relatively near future, while the latter is likely to take place later.⁸

When Will A Universal Language Be Adopted?

In order to discuss the timing of the adoption of the international language, we need to talk about the distinction between an auxiliary language and a global language:

If besee meth you and the other officials of the Government to convene a gathering and choose one of the divers languages, and likewise one of the existing scripts, or else to create a new language and a new script to be taught children in schools throughout the world. They would, in this way, be acquiring only two languages, one their own native tongue, the other the language in which all the peoples of the world would converse. Were men to take fast hold on that which hath been mentioned, the whole earth would come to be regarded as one country, and the people would be relieved and freed from the necessity of acquiring and teaching different languages." (Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of Wolf*)

Here, Baha'u'llah talks about the international language as an auxiliary language to the mother tongues. Thus, the coming of a bilingual age is implied. On the other hand, in another Tablet, Baha'u'llah talks about one common language to be spoken all over the world:

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 diverse languages. Thus the whole earth would come to be regarded as one city and one land. (Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 68)

In the above passage, Baha'u'llah recognizes the convenience of a monolingual world. However the imposition of one universal language upon the peoples of the world and the abandonment of the mother tongues does not seem to fit into the framework of Baha'u'llah's

⁷ A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states, "Certain...laws should be regarded by all believers as universally and vitally applicable at the present time. Others have been formulated in anticipation of a state of society destined to emerge from the chaotic conditions that prevail today... What has not been formulated in the Aqdas... will have to be formulated by the Universal House of Justice." (A letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, 1935, quoted in the Introduction to the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 6)

⁸ Cf. Aitib Taherzadeh's *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, Vol. 4 (p. 59).

teachings. This seeming contradiction is explained in the following letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

What Baha'u'llah is referring to in the Eighth Leaf of the Exalted Paradise is a far distant time, when the world is really one country, and one language would be a sensible possibility. It does not contradict His instruction as to the need immediately for an auxiliary language. (A letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual, March 16, 1946, *Lights of Guidance*, #1141)

Thus, the adoption of an international language as an auxiliary to mother tongues is an immediate need. Judging from the passage taken from *The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, it was an injunction immediately effective during the latter half of the 19th century. On the other hand, adoption of one common tongue as a global language would require a much longer time, possibly several hundred years. The key is that such an adoption must be a “sensible possibility;” that is, peoples in general must feel comfortable and natural about it just as we do about a national language while diverse dialects exist within a nation.

In sum, the adoption of a universal auxiliary language is expected to take place immediately or in the relatively near future, while that of a universal common language in the distant future.

Discussion

3.1. English as a global language

According to Crystal (1997, 2003), English can truly be called a “global language.” A “global language” is a language that has substantial influence on the world in many aspects of its affairs, mainly politics, economy, science and education. With its inner, outer and expanding circles of users, the total number exceeds 2 billion. Although the rest of the world population, some 4 billion, is still not in these circles, the sheer number of users is still great and the expanding circle is ever expanding. There lies the significance and the trend is unprecedented in human history. This trend is further confirmed within the Baha'i community as well. Although the Universal House of Justice has not legislated or does not even seem to have any intention to legislate on this matter, the common language used at the Baha'i World Centre is English.

3.2. Rejection of English

At the same time, we cannot deny the fact that there is a sense of rejection against English. For example, in the former colonies of English-speaking countries (such as Kenya, Tanzania, Malaysia and India), English is rejected and a native language is adopted as a national language. In Latin America, North Africa and other regions, the governments have decided to invest more on their national languages than on English mainly due to lack of funds. In France, Francophone Canada, Japan, Spain, Germany, Mexico and Myanmar, English is rejected because of problems in intelligibility and identity.⁹

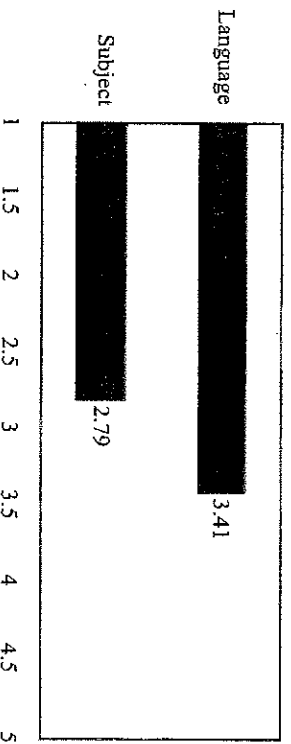
⁹ David Crystal, pp.124-126, *English as a Global Language*, 2003.

3.3. Language attitudes

In 2000 the author conducted a study on language attitudes in college students in Japan and found some interesting results. First, the rating of the idea “English as a second official language of Japan” was 2.55 on a 5-point scale, indicating a neutral position on the whole. This idea was originally proposed by the late Prime Minister of Japan, Obuchi. After the proposal was announced, the nation was literally split into halves of pros and cons.¹⁰ There were numerous programs on TV debating over whether or not to adopt the idea, linking it to the idea of introducing English education at the primary school level. The result of the present survey clearly reflected the nation’s attitude toward it.

Secondly, the students liked English as a language (the rating being 3.21) more than English as a school subject (the rating 2.59). Apparently, their perception and experience with English at school was not very favorable. Learning English at school naturally accompanies academic pressure and stress. Therefore, it is natural that students see school English rather negatively. However, English as a language per se is a different matter; that is, as a practical tool of communication in the real world, as opposed to the academic environment, English is viewed more favorably and therefore may play a more important role in international communication than thought based on students’ performance in school.

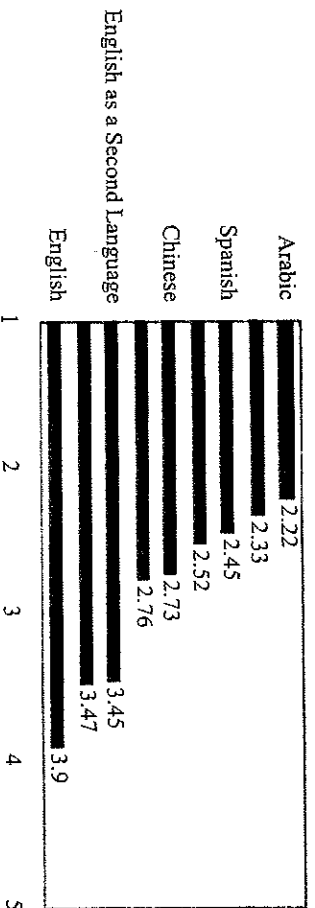
Figure 1. English as a Language vs. Subject



Third, the students were asked to rate the six official languages of the UN along with Japanese and the concept of artificial language—all as the official international language designated by the UN. English was rated the highest, followed by Japanese, artificial language, Chinese, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic. English was rated far more favorably than the others, which shows the students’ acceptance and support of English as a tool for global communication. The interesting point, however, was that English as the international official language was rated significantly higher than English as a second official language for Japan. This is apparently a double standard; that is, there is some reservation against English being used in Japan officially as opposed to English being used globally. Nevertheless, it is clearly shown that in this survey the students viewed English rather favorably as a practical communication tool.

¹⁰ E.g., The February 25, 2000 issue of the *Asahi Shinbun* talks about opposing views citing such well-known thinkers such as Hisashi Inoue, a writer, and the Director of Japan International Exchange Center Yamamoto. While Gregory Clark, President of Yamagata University, supported the proposal, Peter Frankel, a world famous mathematician, resident of Japan and himself a multilingual including Japanese, opposed it.

Figure 2: Language Ratings as an International Language



3.4. Varieties of English

The phenomenon of varieties of English or World Englishes can also be observed in Japan. There are distinct patterns of lexicon, syntax, and phonology in Japanese English. The present author teaches a Spoken English course at his university where a group of about 20 students spends most of the 90-minute class period speaking English. The aim of the course is to have students speak English as much as possible using what they have already “learned” through their grammar lessons in the previous years (starting from their junior high years). The rationale behind the course objective is that most college students have “learned” English rules and words but have not yet “acquired” them because they have not practiced them. So in this course the instructor spends minimum time explaining things about English but rather motivates and encourages students to practice their English and mostly listens to them while only occasionally giving them some quick feedback. Students are given some simple English readings about college life and a long list of questions to generate conversations. They are also required to ask follow-up questions of their own after using the given questions. Students are allowed and actually encouraged to make “mistakes” but are expected to make full English sentences. They are not to speak Japanese but if they have no knowledge of certain words they can use the Japanese counterpart but only as part of a full English sentence. They are graded based on how much and how fluently they speak English.

The result of this approach has been simply overwhelming. The students in this course are at a very low level of English proficiency (TOEIC scores of 300-395) but they speak a significant amount of English. Although they make many grammatical mistakes and use wrong words, their fluency level is very high and they can actually communicate many things about their daily lives. The English they use is typical Japanese English. While native English speakers may have difficulty understanding their English, anyone who is somewhat familiar with Japanese English can easily follow their conversations. Although this type of English may have difficulty being understood at the global level, the result is still encouraging because despite a general belief that Japanese oral proficiency in English is very poor, these students can actually communicate in English.

With proper training and further encouragement, the same students may be able to speak more “correct” English at the same fluency level. Alternatively, modification of English rules would definitely help them speak English with more confidence. That is, irregularities of English rules have been among the sources of Japanese students’ confusion and lack of confidence speaking English. By being “allowed” to make mistakes, they have succeeded in speaking English very fluently. In this connection, there is a great possibility that Japanese may do well in acquiring an artificial language, which has 100% regular rules.¹¹

In this regard, the emergence of World Englishes is, in a sense, an indication of the call for a common language that is easier to adopt and, therefore, implies the need for a modification of an existing language, if not the creation of a brand-new artificial language. Ogden’s Basic English (1930) is one such attempt to simplify a language and eliminate irregular and complex elements from an existing language for the sake of the ease of learning.

Although English is definitely the working common language of the world today, we cannot completely deny the benefits and possibility of developing an artificial, or partially artificial, language, which is easier to learn and acquire. This is a completely new area of future study and research.

3.5. Language is a world view

Language is a wealth of knowledge, values and culture. The diversity of language therefore indicates the diversity of human knowledge, values and cultures. This is a treasure of humanity and thus must be cherished. This is one of the reasons that an international common language cannot and should not replace native languages overnight. Rather, while adopting such a common language, we should share this wealth of knowledge and cultures with each other and the rest of the world freely and generously. In this way, people will learn more and more from each other, accumulating new ideas, views, beauty and richness of human thoughts and emotions. When the time comes, which may be hundreds of years from now, a common language will replace the diverse languages and the humanity will enter a new phase of civilization. This is probably what Baha’u’llah means by the two statements regarding the adoption of an international language. The key to this transition is that it should be gradual, natural and spontaneous. It is a fact that languages change over time. Even without external forces such as coercion through colonial policy, languages naturally change in terms of lexicon, syntax, and phonology. Therefore, it is possible that the need for global communication will influence the status and usage of a country’s mother tongue in the distant future. Humanity is likely to make that choice on its own, rather than having the choice be imposed by force.

3.6. The coming age of bilingualism

The world is apparently moving towards bilingualism. At the same time, the force of its opposition is also at work. Whether we wish to promote bilingualism or to withstand the

¹¹ Japanese students are well known for their receptivity and high performance in learning artificial language such as Esperanto. One of the author’s Esperantist acquaintances recently held an introductory session on Esperanto with a cross-cultural group of young people. While most of non-Japanese speaking youth left the session eventually, all the Japanese-speaking youth remained in the session and enjoyed learning the new language.

oppositional forces, we need to dispel some major misunderstandings about bilinguality and bilingualism.

One of the myths is that “bilinguals can do anything in two languages.” However, this depends on the definition of “bilingualism.” For example, Blomfield’s definition (1935) is “the native-like control of two languages”; Macnamara (1967) defines it as “minimal competence in one of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.” Titone (1972) defines it as the “capacity to speak a second language while following the concepts and structures of that language rather than paraphrasing his or her mother tongue.” Finally, Webster’s definition (1961) is “having or using two languages especially as spoken with the fluency characteristic of a native speaker; a person using two languages especially habitually and with control like that of a native speaker.” None of the definitions, however, regard bilinguals beings able to do “everything,” including reading and writing academic dissertations and giving eloquent instantaneous table speeches, in both languages. Usually, the definition of “bilingualism” is a loose one, referring to the basic four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) or just conversational skills in two languages. Many so-called bilinguals may not be able to read or write fluently in one of their languages, let alone freely translating or interpreting between the two languages. In other words, there are degrees of bilinguality and not all bilinguals can perform various types of activities equally in both languages.

Secondly, many people believe that “bilinguality, once attained, remains the same throughout the lifetime.” The reality is that the above-mentioned degrees of bilinguality fluctuate all the time. In some cases, one language may become stronger and the other weaker. In others, a language may be lost and forgotten, and may or may not come back at a later time.

A third myth is that children of two monolingual parents of different languages spontaneously grow up to be bilingual. There are many children, despite having parents who speak different languages, who do not speak the parents’ languages. This is usually influenced by what language is used inside and outside the home, the status of the two languages in society and other factors.

A fourth myth is that bilinguals are confused linguistically. And a fifth is that bilinguals are confused culturally. Neither of these myths is usually true.

Such misunderstandings need be addressed and explained in educational and social settings so that bilingual education will be effectively carried out. In this sense, further research and educational reform are called for.

3.7. The Tower of Babel

In Chapter 11 of *Genesis*, it is written:

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of

the whole earth.” But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

If we interpret the story freely, the moral of the story is that the arrogance and materialism of humanity caused confusion of tongues and dispersion of the people.¹² In other words, if we wish to unify the diversity of tongues, we need to be humble before God and become more spiritually-minded. That is exactly what the Message of Baha’u’llah is all about for this age. Without these qualities and attitudes, the unity of languages is not possible, let alone the unity of humankind.

Conclusion

The Baha’i perspective on the international language issue is multi-dimensional. First, there are two main answers to the question of what the international language will be. One is to choose a language from the existing languages and the other is to create an artificial one. There is, however, a third possibility being generated from the two, which is to modify an existing language to suit the needs of speakers of various linguistic backgrounds, a primary example of which is Basic English. The phenomenon of World Englishes is also a form of modified language, that is, English. Secondly, the answer to the question “how will the international language be adopted?” is also twofold. One is through the consultation of the governments of the world such as the UN General Assembly or a future world summit on the universal language issue. The other is through the legislation by the Universal House of Justice. Although there are no tangible signs of either, the world at large seems to be going through a “silent” natural selection process. While no one finds the present time to be an opportune moment to officially pronounce English as “the” common language for the global communication, English is already a virtual working world language. At the same time, its “modification” is also taking place in non-English native speaking countries and its ownership is spreading in the “outer circle” of its users.

¹² The story is confirmed by Baha’u’llah. In *Gleanings* (LXXXVII), He states:

Consider the differences that have arisen since the days of Adam. The divers and widely-known languages now spoken by the peoples of the earth were originally unknown, as were the varied rules and customs now prevailing amongst them. The people of those times spoke a language different from those now known. Diversities of language arose in a later age, in a land known as Babel. It was given the name Babel, because the term signifieth “the place where the confusion of tongues arose.” Subsequently Syriac became prominent among the existing languages. The Sacred Scriptures of former times were revealed in that tongue. Later, Abraham, the Friend of God, appeared and shed upon the world the light of Divine Revelation. The language He spoke while He crossed the Jordan became known as Hebrew (Ibrānī), which meaneth “the language of the crossing.” The Books of God and the Sacred Scriptures were then revealed in that tongue, and not until after a considerable lapse of time did Arabic become the language of Revelation... Witness, therefore, how numerous and far-reaching have been the changes in language, speech, and writing since the days of Adam. How much greater must have been the changes before Him.

Thirdly, there are also multi-dimensional answers to the question “when will the international language be adopted?” The great need for an international language as an auxiliary to mother tongues has been around for over a century. However, an official international auxiliary language has not been chosen yet and it might not be realized for a while. At the same time, English as a working world language is gaining greater status every year. The precursor to the first stage of having an international auxiliary language already exists. In the very long run, possibly hundreds of years from now, a universal common language will be used all over the world as a natural thing, just as we speak our national language(s) at this time in history.¹³ In the meantime, the science of artificial languages progresses, and understanding of the international language issue, bilingualism, and linguistic issues in general must be promoted.

We need to consider what we should be doing in relation to global communication in the most immediate future. For us who live in Japan, improving English communication skills is one of the most urgent tasks at hand. Thanks to the development of technology, learning/teaching materials and hard labor, we now have excellent learning and teaching tools as well as wealth of competent educators of English. What seems to be lacking severely at this point is a positive learning attitude. There are still doubts, fears, and anxieties about learning English at an early age. According to Baha’u’llah, bilingual education is a postulate to world citizenship in the future society. It is not a possibility but a prerequisite. The current lack of belief or trust in English education seems to explain the lack of practical training in schools. Otherwise, putting practical English education into practice is simple and easy: Start early with conversational skills, gradually followed by academic English education. However, in order to do this, Japanese society must be educated about concepts and implications of bilingual education, what it is and what it is not. In order to provide such education, we need further research and evidence. And above all, we need a humble attitude to learn from each other’s language and to be submissive before our Creator as implied in the story of the Tower of Babel. Then the future of human prosperity will be a bright one.

Today the greatest need of the world of humanity is discontinuance of the existing misunderstandings among nations. This can be accomplished through the unity of language. Unless the unity of languages is realized, the Most Great Peace and the oneness of the human world cannot be effectively organized and established because the function of language is to portray the mysteries and secrets of human hearts. The heart is like a box, and language is the key. Only by using the key can we open the box and observe the gems it contains. Therefore, the question of an auxiliary international tongue has the utmost importance. Through this means international education and training become possible; the evidence and history of the past can be acquired. The spread of the known facts of the human world depends upon language. The explanation of divine teachings can only be through this medium. As long as diversity of tongues and lack of comprehension of other languages continue, these glorious aims cannot be realized. Therefore, the very first service to the world of man is to establish this auxiliary international means of communication. It will become

¹³ This is, of course, a relative issue. In some countries, even the issue of a national language has not been settled and in fact a focus of national debate (e.g., Canada).

the cause of the tranquility of the human commonwealth. Through it sciences and arts will be spread among the nations, and it will prove to be the means of the progress and development of all races. We must endeavor with all our powers to establish this international auxiliary language throughout the world. It is my hope that it may be perfected through the bounties of God and that intelligent men may be selected from the various countries of the world to organize an international congress whose chief aim will be the promotion of this universal medium of speech. ('Abdu'l-Baha. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 60-61)

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