12. E. SAPIR, Chicago.

The case for a constructed international language.
(Résumé.)

It is very important not to confuse the function of an auxiliary international language with that of a national language normally acquired in childhood. The latter serves as the complete symbol of the emotionally integrated and locally oriented personality. The former has the psychologically less far-reaching but, in the modern world, exceedingly useful function of providing the individual with a fit symbol of solidarity with the international world on those planes of interest which have a true international significance.

There is rapidly growing a real international community which is largely debarred from recognizing itself for what it potentially is by the absence of a fit symbol of expression. This community is based on transnational functions of an economic, technological, scientific and ideological nature. It is more or less parallel to the ecclesiastical and scholarly European medieval community that used Latin
as a medium of expression far more successfully than it could have any other language.

The multiplication of national languages today means a tremendous waste in commercial transactions, adds enormously to the difficulties of travel, is responsible for the extreme cumbersomeness of international political negotiations, and has brought about something like an impasse in the scientific world. The usefulness of exchange professors is more questionable than courtesy allows us to admit. Radio and talking film are ready to bind the peoples of the world together with a common speech that transcends the limited usefulness of national languages, but the present status of human civilization will not allow them to do so.

The educational problem of teaching a variety of separate techniques for the expression of essentially the same meanings is becoming increasingly serious in the modern world. An unnecessary burden is being laid on smaller European nationalities and Oriental peoples in the development of world civilization. The feeling is growing that there is too much to learn that is basically significant for a grasp of the modern world for so much energy to be spent on acquiring irrationally varying symbolisms, none of which can be mastered satisfactorily.

To meet such conditions in the modern world, a highly efficient and maximally simple international language needs to be developed.

A soundly constructed auxiliary language has great advantages. It combines an international function with the elimination of conflicting national claims. It capitalizes for common purposes the stock of words and grammatical techniques which lie scattered about in the more important of the national languages of Europe. It has intellectual value as a help to logical thinking, and as a spur to an analysis which transcends the largely unconscious implications of particular national languages. It encourages in the individual a creative and experimental attitude in the handling of linguistic material.

The term "artificial" does not do psychological nor historical justice to such constructed languages as those in current use. They are artificial in no profounder sense than that in which the technique of an opera singer is "artificial" as compared with the more unconscious technique of a folk-singer.

The current psychological argument as to the supposedly nonvital character of a constructed international language is hardly more than a figure of speech. In learning such a language, for example Esperanto or Interlingua, one builds a new set of habits on the basis of the old linguistic ones. This is precisely what one does when one learns another language as an adult. It is quite a mistake to suppose that an English speaking person's command of French or German is psychologically in the least equivalent to a Frenchman's or a German's command of his native language. All that is managed, in the great majority of cases, is a fairly adequate control of the external features of the foreign language. This incomplete control has, however, the immense advantage of putting the native speaker and the foreigner on a footing of approximate mutual understanding, which is sufficient for the purpose desired.

A constructed international language should be looked at as a system of communication suited to certain difficult situations arising in the sophisticated modern world — a system of signs consciously modified and regularized yet psychologically based on the more unconscious folk-systems of communication, precisely as mathematical, scientific and technological symbolisms are both inter-
The fear of the splitting up of an international language into mutually unintelligible dialects is not corroborated by actual experience. The constructed languages in use are so simple phonetically that even with considerable latitude of individual pronunciation no ambiguities of moment are likely to arise. National languages are far more ramified dialectically than a constructed international language would be.

One should carefully refrain from injecting into a discussion of the international language question any of those romantic concepts in regard to language as an "organism" which have already done so much harm in the study of linguistic processes. It is particularly we linguists who stand in danger of making a fetish of the materials of our study. The romanticism of the past should never bind the hand or daunt the will of the future.<>

Editorial Note


The following errors in the originally published version have been corrected, directly into the text printed here (page references are to the original):

- p. 86, title: THE CASE FOR CONSTRUCTED (correct: THE CASE FOR A CONSTRUCTED)
- p. 88, l. 10: particulary (correct: particularly)

An editorial intervention concerning punctuation has been indicated with <>.

- p. 87, l. 1. read: other language (with space between the two words).
ANNEX:

The Statement of the International Auxiliary Language Association
made at the second International Conference of Linguists (Geneva, 1931)

In the same section as the one to which Edward Sapir contributed his paper "The Case for [a] Constructed International Language" a statement was presented by the IALA. The statement\(^1\) is reproduced here because of the information it contains on the context in which Sapir, Jespersen, and Collinson wrote on theoretical and practical aspects of international auxiliary languages, and because of its relevance for Sapir’s involvement in the project of a “universal conceptual grammar,” which he was to carry out through his study of formal and semantic structures corresponding to notions such as “totality,” “ending-point” and “grading” [see section V], and also through innovative research, sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, on English grammar.\(^2\)

---

\(^1\) The statement was published as §14 within the section devoted to the problem of an international auxiliary language (pp. 88–89 in the Actes).
The International Auxiliary Language Association in the United States Incorporated (a private organization familiarly known as IALA), carries on, as one of its main activities, research along three lines: educational, sociological and linguistic.

The aim of the linguistic research is to furnish material which will aid in the development of an international language suited to the functions which it should perform.

At the invitation of IALA and convened by Prof. O. Jespersen, a Meeting of Linguistic Research was held in Geneva March-April, 1930.

For the first time, eminent protagonists of diverse constructed idioms and distinguished philologists from European and American Universities met together not to discuss claims of superiority for any particular auxiliary language but for the purpose of finding ways in which to collaborate toward a common goal. The philologists elaborated a comprehensive plan for linguistic research, based on the suggestions sent by Professors K. Asakawa of Yale University and R. H. Fife of Columbia University. All participants agreed that it is reasonable to hope that the carrying out of the plan might be a potent factor in bringing about ultimate accord in respect to a definitive form of international language.

The research is planned in three circles:

1. *Foundations of Language*, logical and psychological, an approach to the international language problem. A more philosophical study, according to a scheme drawn up by Professors Sapir and Collinson.

2. *Comparative Studies* of four national languages (English, French, German, Russian) and four international languages. An objective examination of the structure of the selected languages, both with regard to details and to the languages as wholes.

3. *Preparation for Synthesis*. A comprehensive survey and criticism of the results of the first two cycles of research with a view to finding data for a synthetic scheme of a definitive language for international use.

The projected research of the first and second circles includes studies in language structure and vocabulary. The former are to be pursued first and are to serve a material for further labors, namely the working out of a generalised or universal conceptual grammar, and of outlines of structure, both of which might be used as a basis for general language study and as a norm for the structure of an international language.

The research has been begun and is proceeding under the direction of Professor E. Sapir. The work will proceed to completion if sufficient funds are secured.

IALA has no intention of developing a new language. It believes that after its research is finished, an independent body of experts should be entrusted with the task of recommending the form of the ultimate international language. It desires only to do its share in preparing for such a possible body material which will be relevant and worthy. It believes that in the evolution of languages unconscious and conscious processes have gone and must continue to go hand in hand, and that we are living in an age when creative consciousness can take hold more and more in the welding for beneficial purposes of the diverse symbolisms produced by
SECTION FIVE

STUDIES IN UNIVERSAL CONCEPTUAL GRAMMAR
(1930, 1932, 1944)
THE FUNCTION OF AN INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY LANGUAGE

As to the theoretical desirability of an international auxiliary language there can be little difference of opinion. 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 as to either method or content. So far as the advocates of a constructed international language are concerned, it is rather to be wondered at how much in common their proposals actually have, both in vocabulary and in general spirit of procedure. The crucial differences of opinion lie not so much between one constructed language and another as between the idea of a constructed language and that of an already well-established national one, whether in its traditional, authorized form or in some simplified form of it. It is not uncommon to hear it said by those who stand somewhat outside the international language question 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.

It is the purpose of this paper to try to clarify the fundamental question of what is to be expected of an international auxiliary language, and whether the explicit and tacit requirements can be better satisfied by a constructed language or by a national language, including some simplified version of it. I believe that much of the difficulty in the international language question lies precisely in lack of clarity as to these fundamental functions.

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 of the world is driven to spend an
enormous amount of time, labour, and money in providing for transla-
tion services. From a purely technological point of view, all this is
sheer waste, and while one accepts the necessity of going to all the
linguistic trouble that the expansion of trade demands, one does so
with something like a shrug of the shoulder. One speaks of a 'necessary
evil.' Again, at an international scientific meeting one is invariably
disappointed to find that the primary difficulty of communicating
with foreign scientists because of differences of language habits makes
it not so easy to exchange ideas of moment as one had fantasied might
be the case before setting sail. Here again one speaks of a 'necessary
evil,' and comforts oneself with the reflection that if the scientific
ideas which it was not too easy to follow at the meeting are of moment
they will, sooner or later, be presented in cold print, so that nothing
is essentially lost. One can always congratulate oneself on having
had an interesting time and on having made some charming personal
contacts. Such examples can, of course, be multiplied ad infinitum.
Too much is not made, as a rule, of any specific difficulty in linguistic
communication, but the cumulative effect of these difficulties is stu-
pendous in magnitude. Sooner or later one chafes and begins to wonder
whether the evil is as 'necessary' as tradition would have it. Impa-
tience translates itself into a desire to have something immediate done
about it all, and, as is generally the case with impatience, resolves
itself in the easiest way that lies ready 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 in
the world of commerce and travel? The consideration which gives rise
to reflections of this sort, grounded in impatience as it is, looks 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 is not as easy to state and can be so stated
as to seem to be identical with the first. It should 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, of course, in the last analysis, for every type of expression
of the human spirit which is of more than local interest, which in turn
can be restated so as to include any and all human interests. The ex-
igencies 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 expect 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.

These two opposing considerations seem to me to be the primary ones. They may be rephrased as "what can be done right now" and "what should be done in the long run." 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 favour 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, once accepted as an international language, is no more secure than French has proved to be as the one and only 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 implica-
tions which could not be entirely shaken off, and so, while they seemed for a long 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 trade, finance, and superficial practicality in general that attaches to English may, in the long run, prove more of a hindrance than a help to the unreserved acceptance of English as an adequate means of international expression. One must beware of an over-emphasis on the word 'auxiliary.' It is perfectly true that for untold 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 powerful expression 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 localism or nationality.

Whether or not some national language, say, English, or a constructed language, say Esperanto, is to win out in the immediate future, does not depend primarily on conscious forces that can be manipulated, but on many obscure and impersonal political, economic and social determinants. One can only hope that one senses the more significant of these determinants and helps along with such efforts as one can master. 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 in the least 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 more lumbering methods of expressing these quantities and relations in 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.
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 the earliest years of our childhood these difficulties do not readily appear. To one who comes to English from a language which possesses a totally different structure such facts as these are disconcerting. But 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, in short, 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

\[
\text{to help:help} = \text{to obey:obedience}
\]
\[
= \text{to grow:growth}
\]
\[
= \text{to drown:drowning},
\]
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 himself 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 '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 pseudo-simplicity. French and German illustrate the misleading character of apparent grammatical simplicity 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.

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. It is well known that the tense systems of French, English and German teem with logical inconsistencies as they are actually used. Many categories which are of great logical and psychological importance are so haltingly expressed that it takes a good deal of effort to prove to the average man that they exist at all. A good example of such a category is that of ‘aspect,’ in the technical sense of the word. Few English-speaking people see such a locution as ‘to burst into tears’ or ‘to burst out laughing’ as much more than an idiomatic oddity. As a matter of fact, English is here trying to express, as best it can, an intuition of the ‘momentaneous aspect’; in other words, of activity seen as a point in contrast to activity seen as a line. Logically and psychologically, nearly every activity can be thought of as either point-like or line-like in character, and there are, of course, many expressions in English which definitely point to the one or to the other, but the treatment of these intuitions is fragmentary and illogical throughout.

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. 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 international medium.
The supposed inferiority of a constructed language to a national one on the score of richness of connotation is, of course, no criticism of the idea of a constructed language. All that the criticism 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 are in most of these national languages which are of importance for the international language question thwarted by all sorts of irrelevant factors that would not apply to a constructed language. English, for instance, has a great many formal resources 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. There is a perfectly obvious objection that is often raised at this point. We are told that normal human expression does not crave any such accuracy as is attained by these rigorous disciplines. True, but it is not a question of remodeling language in the spirit of mathe-
matics and symbolic logic, but merely of giving it the structural means whereby it may refine itself in as economical and unambiguous a manner as possible.

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 we 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 labour 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 rigour 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 definite 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 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. As the Oriental peoples become of more and more importance in the modern world, the air of sanctity that attaches to English or German or French is likely to seem less and less a thing to be taken for granted, and it is not at all unlikely that the eventual triumph of the international language movement will owe much to the Chinaman's and the Indian's indifference to the vested interests of Europe, though the actual stock of basic words in any practical international language is almost certain to be based on the common European fund. 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? It is, of course, not the language as such which is sinned against, but the conventions of fitness which are in the minds of the natives who act as custodians of the 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 labour 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 language 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. Intelligent men should not allow themselves to become international language doctrinaires. They should do all they can to keep the problem experimental, welcoming criticism at every point and trusting to the gradual emergence of an international language that is a fit medium for the modern spirit.

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 infinitely simpler, more regular, and more logical than any one of them.

Editorial Note

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 overemphasis 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 are 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-
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 creativity. 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 resources at its disposal which it seems unable to use adequately; for instance, there is no reason why the suffix \textit{-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.

Editorial Note