Esperantic Studies

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The Challenge of Interlingualism: A Research Invitation

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What is an interlingual world?

For millennia, the world has exhibited various combinations of linguistic homogeneity (unilingualism) and linguistic plurality (multilingualism). Peoples separated by barriers such as mountains and states have developed and used thousands of diverse languages, while social forces such as trade, religion, education, conquest, and colonization have spread the use of particular languages across continents and oceans.

The spread of intercommunal languages, while providing a solution to the problem of communal isolation, also creates problems of its own. Communal languages, in which diverse ideas and ways of life are cultivated, shrink and die in competition with intercommunal ones; the latter's native speakers enjoy unearned privileges; and widespread costs and inefficiencies are entailed by language learning, translation and duplication.

In its evolution between the opposing poles of many isolated language communities or a single world language, the global linguistic system could take many forms. Some of these potential forms might exhibit, at one and the same time, high levels of linguistic diversity, linguistic integration, linguistic equity and linguistic efficiency. We refer to any sustainable variant displaying such properties as an interlingual world.

Do we want an interlingual world?

Diversity, integration, equity, efficiency and sustainability are widely professed values today, for instance in relation to education, health, and telecommunications. Yet one is hard pressed to find a similar consensus in the field of language. We surmise that this is largely due to perceived conflicts among these values. For example, those who dislike linguistic diversity or oppose linguistic equality may do so because they fear greater costs (whether societal or personal) and less integration. Indeed, it seems likely that an interlingual world would embody a number of trade-offs between the five values, rather than maximizing any of them.

In this respect, however, language is no different from education, health, telecommunications, or any other complex system for the production, distribution, and use of social goods. We suspect that

an interlingual world would be broadly consensual, if it were shown to be possible.

Is an interlingual world achievable?

Obviously, achieving an interlingual world would not be easy. How could the world be highly diverse in language, yet highly interactive, without great expenditures to achieve intercommunication? What would induce people alive today to accept the burden of change in their languages or language regimes if only future generations would benefit from such change? Why would those who invent and produce language-processing tools devote their efforts to serving any but the users of major languages? What would induce the beneficiaries of today's linguistic arrangements, most notably the native speakers and fluent learners of English, to support a transition that would neutralize their language-based privileges?

Whether an interlingual world is achievable, and if so how, is a principal research interest of the Esperantic Studies Foundation.

The possible answers to this question range from "The world is naturally becoming interlingual, and nothing can be done to stop it" to "Nothing can be done to stop the world from becoming ever less interlingual."

Any answer in this range might provide the basis for a research program on interlingualism, for instance by exploring the impact of current linguistic trends and processes on the range of potentially achievable worlds. Other, more action-oriented answers might take the form, "The best (or only) way to make the world interlingual is to ..."

Given the apparent value conflicts inherent in the notion of an interlingual world, we would be intrigued by any coherent description of what such a world would be like, how it would work, and how we might transform today's world into it.

Ideas of an interlingual world

We haven't found any such coherent descriptions yet, but at least some bodies of thought offer preliminary accounts, or inspirations for accounts, of an interlingual world ("interlingualism" for short). Outlined in schematic fashion, here are five variants of interlingualism that appear to have acquired a significant literature and a corps of advocates, researchers and practitioners:

World English (WE): The most widespread second language of the present day, English, might make the world interlingual by becoming so well integrated in educational and social systems worldwide that it was accessible to all at minimal cost. One variant of World English is unilingualism; however, if the world's majority were motivated to keep cultivating their autochthonous languages, and if any related economic or social costs could be compensated, English might become the world's "second native language", transcending but coexisting with a multiplicity of other languages.

Esperantism (E): An invented language (not necessarily Esperanto itself), designed as a global auxiliary language in which fluency can be achieved at low cost, might make the world interlingual. If it became customary to use such a language for all translingual communication, the burden of linguistic accommodation would be both small and equal for all. If the language retained its auxiliary status, bilingualism would become a near-universal condition.

Language Brokers (LB): Professional translators and interpreters might achieve an interlingual world by enabling people without a common language to communicate with success, despite greatly dissimilar experiences and beliefs. If appropriate conditions for such work became normative, and if translators and interpreters were efficient and numerous enough, they might make it possible for most people to cultivate their own languages and communicate interlingually without the burdens and risks of widespread language learning.

Plurilingualism (P): A world in which knowing many languages is as normal as knowing many people might be an interlingual world. If breakthroughs in the methodology of language teaching could be verified and propagated, and if multilingual competence became widely valued, people who needed to communicate across language barriers would normally have or could easily develop the ability to do so.

Technologism (T): Invention might resolve the apparent incompatibilities of interlingualism. If the intricacies of grammar, meaning, and communicative strategy could be understood and codified, language barriers might disappear altogether in the presence of fully automatic translation between the world's tongues, or be superseded by novel, automated, non- or panlingual means of communication.

Research on interlingualism: What next?

1. Extension: We have summarized five ideas of how an interlingual world might be achieved and sustained. What other promising ideas exist? How might the overall concept of interlingualism be further developed and applied?

2. Clarification: We want to see each idea developed in much greater detail than the preceding sketches. To what extent and in what senses would its implementation make the world linguistically diverse, integrated, equitable, efficient, and sustainable? Who would do what in order to transform the world from its status quo to the envisioned state? What would induce those people to take the required actions? How would the world's interlingualism be sustained once it is achieved? What forces tending to erode it would exist, and how would they be counteracted? What amounts and kinds of coercion or inducements would be required to achieve and to sustain an interlingual world?

3. Confrontation: How do the alternative ideas of an interlingual world interact? Are they mutually exclusive, compatible, or complementary? What do advocates of each idea assert about the others: impractical, infeasible, unnatural, unstable, unjust, out of synchrony with history? What defenses or refinements arise from those claims? Does each represent an imperfect approximation to an interlingual ideal, and, if so, to which values and interests does each give relative preference? Would one idea be more achievable but another more sustainable? Would it be reasonable to promote one idea at first, followed by a transition to another, or to promote more than one at once?

4. Confirmation: The assumptions underlying the ideas of an interlingual world can be empirically verified, refuted, modified, and quantified. What are the most critical tests for each idea—the tests whose results could make us reject the idea and avoid a need for additional testing on it? Should the ideas be tested in a particular sequence, and, if so, why? What is already known about the costs, rates, qualities, limits, and other relevant parameters? We wish to contribute new results that will allow us to evaluate the feasibility of an interlingual world and strategies for its implementation.

RSVP: If you are a scholar or applied researcher interested in the subject of interlingualism, the Esperantic Studies Foundation invites you to keep us informed of your activities and publications and welcomes your inquiries about proposed research, particularly research that responds to this statement of interests. Comments are invited to Jonathan Pool (office@centerplex.net) or Mark Fettes (mfettes@magi.com).

Related Research

Two articles published in Esperanto in a recent issue of *GRKG Humankybernetik* (vol. 39, no. 1, March 1998) may be of interest to ES readers as well. They are summarized here by ESF treasurer Jonathan Pool, whose own article, "Optimal Language Regimes for the European Union," was reprinted in English in the same issue

> **Zlatko Tišljar.** "Lingvo-Orientiga Instruado (LOI) cele al rapidigo de la lernado de fremdlingvoj: Sloven-kroat-aŭstra eksperimento 1993-1995." ("Language-Orientation Instruction (LOI) With the Aim of Speeding the Learning of Foreign Languages: A Slovenian-Croatian-Austrian Experiment, 1993-1995.") Pp. 28-35.

Tišljar asserts that the results of the indicated experiment show that an investment of 70 hours in the study of Esperanto before the study of English or German causes a reduction of more than 120 hours in the amount of time needed for the achievement of a particular level of competence in the target language. The experiment made use of control groups. Statistical significance would appear to be an issue, however, because the numbers of subjects were small, in the 6-14 range per group, and the inter-group variability in the Esperanto payback was great (even negative for some groups). The author does not discuss any test of statistical significance. The article includes a bibliography of related prior work.

> **Helmar Frank.** "Farebla plurlingveco en Eŭropo kaj en la scienca mondo." ("Manageable Plurilingualism in Europe and in the Scientific World"). Pp. 36-40..

This article is somewhat similar to the statement on interlingualism in this issue of ES. Frank asks whether we should want the masses to be bilingual in a native language and a neutral language or plurilingual. He argues that we want not only linguistic diversity but also coexistence, communication, and cooperation and asks how linguistic diversity can be compatible with them. He asks whether this compatibility could be achieved with