

Extract from a Research Department memorandum dated 7 July 1994

[see citations and document info in the two links below]

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The Research Department has studied the questions concerning an international auxiliary language raised by.... He expresses the view that there is an urgent need for the world to adopt an international auxiliary language and for the Bahá'ís to be in the forefront of helping to make this a reality. He indicates a willingness to spend time researching and promoting this undertaking, and to this end, he raises a number of issues about the nature of such a language, its promotion and its relationship to the Lesser Peace....

1. An International Auxiliary Language

We attach a compilation of extracts entitled “The Principle of an International Auxiliary Language” which addresses, in broad terms, the issues raised by Mr. ... and which serves as the basis for the comments which follow. There are, of course, many other references in the published Writings and in the talks given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His travels in the West, many of which were collected in Paris Talks and The Promulgation of Universal Peace. Additional talks on this subject can be found in a number of the volumes of Star of the West, for example:

volume III, no. 3, pp. 23-24
volume III, no. 19, p. 5
volume IV, no. 2, pp. 34-37

In addition, there is a chapter on the universal language in Payám-i-Malakút, a compilation prepared by Mr. Ishráq-Khávarí. Some of the Persian friends living in ... would, undoubtedly, have a copy of this book.

1.1 Degree of Priority?

With regard to the role of the Bahá'ís in promoting an international auxiliary language, Mr. ... enquires about the degree of priority that the believers should give to this activity at this point in time. We call attention to the following points, gleaned from the attached compilation:

- Shoghi Effendi underlines the importance of an international auxiliary language. In a letter dated 24 April 1939, written on his behalf, he refers to it as “an indispensable element in the upbuilding of the coming New World Order”.

- The Guardian summarizes the “whole question of an international language and its relation to the Faith” in the following extract from a letter dated 17 October 1944, written on his behalf to an individual believer:

We, as Bahá'ís, are very anxious to see a universal auxiliary tongue adopted as soon as possible; we are not the protagonists of any one language to fill this post. If the Governments of the world should agree on an existing language, or a constructed,

new tongue, to be used internationally, we would heartily support it because we desire to see this step in the unification of the human race take place as soon as possible.

- The Universal House of Justice in a letter dated 2 June 1982 written on its behalf indicated that “the important thing now ... is for the Bahá’ís to promote the principle” of an international auxiliary language. It invited individual believers, who have “a particular interest in this subject” and who feel so inclined, to study Esperanto.

- With regard to overall priorities, in a letter dated 2 March 1976 written on its behalf, the Universal House of Justice stressed the importance of “teaching the Cause and winning the goals of the ... Plan”.

1.2 The Nature of an International Auxiliary Language

Mr. ... enquires whether the Universal House of Justice sees the immediate need for creating or adopting a complex language, suited to “the exchange of ideas and the advancement of understanding at scientific, technological, commercial, literary and translation levels,” or the development of “truly a universal ‘second language’” that would enable people “to communicate on a merely social level”. We wish to note that, in the first instance, the governments of the world will select the international auxiliary language. See section 1.3 below for a discussion of the timing of the adoption of an international language.

In a more general sense, Mr. ...’s question impinges on the subject of the nature of an international auxiliary language. Though the extracts contained in the attached compilation deal mostly with Esperanto, they appear to shed some light on the potential complexity of and the functions which such a language might be expected to serve. For example:

- Shoghi Effendi, in letters written on his behalf, appears to have regarded Esperanto as a vehicle for “introducing the Teachings into important social and intellectual circles” (28 May 1937). He called upon the believers “to learn it and to translate Bahá’í literature into it” (17 October 1944), and he recognized its value in fostering “unity and understanding” (5 April 1947).

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá envisaged the development of a language “more complete” than Esperanto, as it existed at that time. The Guardian indicated that the international language of the future was to serve as “an international medium of communication” (26 December 1936), as “a medium of exchange between the nations and peoples of the world” (4 June 1937). And, the Universal House of Justice indicated that it would “be used in all international commerce” (8 June 1980).

The following two extracts from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi ... are also of interest as they were responses to questions from individuals about the suitability of specific languages to serve as an auxiliary language. The final sentence of the first excerpt appears to contain a general principle to guide the selection of an international language:

He was interested in your efforts to make the English language, which undoubtedly is the most generally spoken and widely understood, the world’s auxiliary language, and we must wait and see how other European nations receive it. Of course as you had well put it, the mere existence of prejudice is no argument against the possibility of making an existing language universal. The world must try to overcome its many defects and not reinforce it. Perhaps the main consideration in future

will be the specific qualities of a language as being exact, rich and easy to learn for both East and West.

(18 May 1928 to an individual believer)

Regarding your question of “Basic English’s” usefulness as an international language: He is not very familiar with it, as he is too preoccupied with the tremendous amount of work he has to do here. But what little he has read about it makes him doubt whether it would ever be adequate to meet the requirements of an auxiliary tongue.

(30 June 1944 to an individual believer)

1.3 Relationship to the Lesser Peace

Mr. ... asks whether the adoption of an international auxiliary language will be one of “the most important steps that needs to be taken to bring about the Lesser Peace” or whether it will be adopted “as a result of the process of establishing such a political peace”. Before addressing this issue it is important to consider the way in which the international auxiliary language will be adopted. In a letter dated 8 June 1980 written on its behalf to an individual believer ... the Universal House of Justice calls attention to two stages in this process:

...there are two different provisions in the Sacred Texts for the selection of an International Auxiliary Language. On the one hand, this task is given to the governments of the world, on the other it is given to the House of Justice. It is not possible now to foresee exactly how this will come about, but it would seem reasonable to suppose that, long before the Bahá’í community is large enough or can exercise the authority to produce such a world-embracing change, events will compel the governments, either progressively or all in concert, to select an International Auxiliary Language to be taught as a second language in all schools and to be used in all international commerce. At a much later stage, possibly at the time of the Bahá’í World Commonwealth, the Universal House of Justice may well decide to review the situation and either confirm the decision that the governments had made, or change the choice to a more suitable language.

As to whether the adoption of an international auxiliary language is a prerequisite to the Lesser Peace, the Research Department has not been able to locate any clear statement in the Bahá’í Writings that relates specifically to this question. It is, however, interesting to note that the Universal House of Justice in the Peace Statement identifies a “fundamental lack of communication between peoples” as a factor which “seriously undermines efforts towards world peace”. And the House of Justice indicates that the adoption of an international auxiliary language “would go far to resolving this problem and necessitates the most urgent attention”.