

THE PRINCIPLE OF AN INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY LANGUAGE

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

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The difficulties of international communication in a polyglot world are strikingly evident to any Bahá'í who has gone travel teaching to foreign lands or has attended international conferences. The Universal House of Justice feels that for it to choose any language for the Bahá'ís to use as an international auxiliary language would give rise to greater difficulties than would thereby be solved at the present time. The friends, however, remembering that this is one of the very important principles of the Faith, would do well to support the concept whenever possible, and to pray that the time is not far removed when the governments of the nations will adopt a single language to be taught in all the schools of the world as an auxiliary to the pupils' mother-tongue. This compilation has been prepared at the World Centre of the Faith, on instruction of the Universal House of Justice, to assist the friends everywhere to arrive at a greater understanding of this principle, to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed Himself in a number of His talks in the West.

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Thou hast written regarding the language of Esperanto. This language will be spread and universalized to a certain degree, but later on a language more complete than this, or the same language will undergo some changes and alterations and will be adopted and become universal. I hope that Dr. Zamenhof may become assisted by the invisible confirmation and do a great service to the world of humanity.

(Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás, vol. 3 (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930 printing), p. 692) [1]

As to the Esperantists, associate with them. Whenever you find one with capacity, convey to him the fragrances of Life.... It is evident that the Esperantists are receptive and thou art familiar with and expert in their language. Communicate also with the Esperantists of Germany and other places.... Grieve not over the apathy and coldness of the Hague meeting. Put thy trust in God. Our hope is that among the people the Esperanto language may hereafter have a powerful effect. Thou hast now sown the seed. Assuredly it will grow. Its growth dependeth upon God.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), sec. 228, p. 308) [2]

From letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

What Bahá'u'lláh says is that the Supreme House of Justice will appoint a committee that will study the whole matter and then either choose one of the existing languages or create a

new one, to function as an international language. The Master never went beyond that, i.e. He never tried to solve the problem Himself and choose that language. He still leaves it to the Supreme House of Justice. But He says that Esperanto will spread and even went so far as to encourage all the friends who possibly can to study it. In fact the knowledge of Esperanto has proven very useful for one who tries to teach in different countries of the world. But whether Esperanto will become the international language which is to be a part of our religious and social duties to study, no one knows, and we have no evidence that the Master made any definite statement along that line. The Master has scarcely ever assumed the solution of a problem that Bahá'u'lláh has referred to the Supreme House of Justice. Esperanto may become an international language, but it depends upon the House of Justice to choose it as the international language. And no one is in a position to foretell.

(30 August 1928 to an individual believer) [3]

As to your suggestion regarding a more widespread use of Esperanto among the Bahá'ís as a medium of correspondence, Shoghi Effendi, as you know, has been invariably encouraging the believers, both in the East and in the West, to make an intensive study of that language, and to consider it as an important medium for the spread of the Cause in international circles. He has been specially urging the friends to have the Cause well represented in all Esperanto Congresses and associations, and by this means cultivate greater friendship and co-operation between them and the Esperantists.

But in this connection, he feels, he must make it clear that although the Cause views with much sympathy and appreciation the activities which the Esperantists are increasingly initiating for the spread of their language, yet it considers that the adoption of Esperanto by the entire world is by no means an inevitable fact. Neither Bahá'u'lláh, nor even 'Abdu'l-Bahá, ever stated that Esperanto will be the international auxiliary language. The Master simply expressed the hope that it may, provided certain conditions were fulfilled, develop into such a medium.

(3 August 1935 to an individual believer) [4]

Concerning your study of Esperanto: the Guardian does not feel it advisable that you get too busy introducing any changes in that language, as this is not only a type of activity for which you are not qualified, but is also void of any use or advantage as far as your Bahá'í work is concerned, in view of the fact that it is by no means certain that Esperanto will necessarily develop into the world auxiliary language referred to by Bahá'u'lláh in His writings.

(17 April 1936 to an individual believer) [5]

Regarding the teaching of Esperanto: the Guardian thoroughly appreciates the efforts you are exerting for the spread of this language, and fully realizes that through them you can find many openings for teaching the Cause. He wishes me, however, to bring to your attention the fact that neither Bahá'u'lláh nor 'Abdu'l-Bahá did specifically state that Esperanto would certainly become the international auxiliary language of the future. Neither did they enjoin its teaching upon the believers. What 'Abdu'l-Bahá chiefly did was to highly praise it, and to reveal its possibilities. The teaching of Esperanto is, therefore, not a command or an obligation in the sense that praying is for instance. What is enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh is either the creation of a new language, or the adoption of one of the existing languages for use as an international medium of communication. Let us hope that Esperanto may some day develop into such a medium.

(26 December 1936 to an individual believer) [6]

As to your question as to what constitutes indirect teaching: it essentially consists in presenting some of the humanitarian or social teachings of the Cause which are shared by those whom we are teaching, as a means of attracting them to those aspects of the Faith which are more challenging in character, and are specifically and solely Bahá'í. The teaching of Esperanto, for instance, has been a very useful way of presenting the Cause indirectly to many people. It has opened many doors of contact for the believers, and has lately proved to be of tremendous help in introducing the Teachings into important social and intellectual circles.

(28 May 1937 to an individual believer) [7]

Regarding the subject of Esperanto: it should be made clear to the believers that while the teaching of that language has been repeatedly encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá there is no reference either from Him or from Bahá'u'lláh that can make us believe that it will necessarily develop into the international auxiliary language of the future. Bahá'u'lláh has specified in His Writings that such a language will have either to be chosen from one of the existing languages, or an entirely new one should be created to serve as a medium of exchange between the nations and peoples of the world. Pending this final choice, the Bahá'ís are advised to study Esperanto only in consideration of the fact that the learning of this language can considerably facilitate intercommunication between individuals, groups and Assemblies throughout the Bahá'í world in the present stage of the evolution of the Faith.

(4 June 1937 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [8]

One thing, however, the Guardian feels the believers should be very careful to avoid in all such contacts with the Esperantists: namely that of giving them the impression that they consider Esperanto as necessarily constituting that international auxiliary language of the future referred to by Bahá'u'lláh and stressed by Him as an indispensable element in the upbuilding of the coming New World Order.

To give them such a false conception of the true Bahá'í attitude regarding the choice of the future world international language would not only be an act of dishonesty and disloyalty towards the Cause, but would lead to serious misunderstandings and misapprehensions, and eventually result in counteracting the effect of any temporary gains or advantages which may accrue to the Faith through such association and contacts with the Esperantists.

It is not so much that language as the central idea it embodies and inculcates which the Bahá'ís endorse, and only through keeping firm to such an attitude can they hope to establish any fruitful and enduring contacts with various Esperanto groups and associations throughout the world.

(24 April 1939 to an individual believer) [9]

He feels that this is a very important opportunity which you have now obtained of teaching the Faith to the Eskimo people, and he hopes your efforts will be crowned with success.

He would not advise you to teach them Esperanto, as we have no way of knowing whether it will ultimately be chosen as the auxiliary language of the world. He thinks the most

direct and quickest way of communicating with them in a common tongue should be chosen; in other words either you should learn their language or they yours, whichever will yield the quickest results.

(12 December 1942 to an individual believer) [10]

We have no authentic record of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s in which He states that Esperanto will be the universal language of the future. It may be Esperanto, it may be some other language, we do not know; but as we believe so firmly in the necessity of an international language, we are always eager to co-operate with the Esperantists.

The thing of primary importance at present, especially in America, is the teaching of the Cause. With good will and determination an auxiliary language—especially one of the nature of Esperanto—can easily, and relatively quickly, be learned; whereas the Cause requires that people change not only certain ideas but their very characters and habits, and this is much harder to do and often takes a long time!

(25 January 1943 to an individual believer) [11]

Regarding the whole question of an international language and its relation to the Faith: 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.

Esperanto has been in wide use, more so than any similar language, all over the world, and the Bahá’ís have been encouraged by both the Master and the Guardian to learn it and to translate Bahá’í literature into it. We cannot be sure it will be the chosen international language of the future; but as it is the one which has spread most, both East and West, we should certainly continue to co-operate with its members, learn to speak it and translate Bahá’í literature into it.

He feels you can rest assured that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement, made in Paris, was prompted by His insight and wisdom and not due to the opinions of anyone else. Naturally the money of the Cause should not be spent on translating and publishing literature in international languages that have no following worth mentioning!

(17 October 1944 to an individual believer) [12]

He feels that the subject of the Bahá’í work in Esperanto in Germany is a matter for you to take up with the National Spiritual Assembly; we Bahá’ís do not claim Esperanto will be the auxiliary language of the future—but, as we firmly believe in the necessity of an auxiliary language, we are glad to support this work by publishing books in Esperanto and encouraging the Bahá’ís to learn it, if they wish to. Co-operation with this society is an excellent means of spreading the Cause, as Martha Root demonstrated in her travels. However, all details in this matter must be decided by the National Spiritual Assembly. You can contact Bahá’í Esperantists in England and the U.S.A. through their respective National Spiritual Assemblies.

(29 July 1946 to an individual believer) [13]

Regarding your question about the Esperantists: for many years they have been one of our closest contacts in Europe, and many of them have become believers. They are working for one of our greatest principles, and we certainly should associate with them. In Germany the Bahá'ís published an Esperanto magazine, and Martha Root represented the Cause at Esperanto congresses. We cannot say we are sure this language will be the international one, but we are anxious to see it spread as it fosters unity and understanding. By all means foster your contact with them. Whether Esperanto will be chosen as the international language or not we cannot say, but we can say we hope it will spread because it nearly fulfils such a noble purpose.

(5 April 1947 to an individual believer) [14]

He was also very pleased to see the contact with the Esperantists is being maintained. This friendly co-operation with them, and attendance at their Congresses, is very good, and will no doubt bring the Bahá'í Cause to many of their members' attention. Also, he hopes, it will lead to many of them becoming Bahá'ís in the future.

(24 March 1949 to an individual believer) [15]

From letters written by or on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

Your letter of 9 'Aimat, 128 expressing your feeling that the endorsement by the Universal House of Justice of an international auxiliary language for Bahá'í conventions would not prejudice any future World Government in its choice of world-wide tongue for official use, and that Esperanto is widely used by clerical, businessmen's and scientific conventions, has been received.

Regarding your first comment, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh has said that the Supreme House of Justice will appoint a committee that will study the whole matter and then either choose one of the existing languages or create a new one to function as an international language, when such a choice shall have been made the action will automatically constitute an endorsement of the chosen auxiliary language.

With reference to Esperanto, we share with you an excerpt from a letter written on behalf of the beloved Guardian by his secretary to an individual in 1937:

The interest which the Bahá'ís have and should have in this language is essentially because of the vital significance of the idea it represents rather than the belief in its inherent worth as a suitable and adequate international medium of expression.

The Bahá'ís indeed welcome Esperanto as the first experiment of its kind in modern times. They are in full sympathy with the Esperantists in so far as they stress the absolute necessity for the creation of an international language to be studied by all the peoples of the world in addition to their respective national languages.

As to the most propitious time for the choosing of an international auxiliary language, we feel that it is not feasible for the House of Justice to make the choice at this time.

(8 June 1971 to an individual believer) [16]

We have consulted about your joint proposal for the formation of a League of Bahá'í Esperantists, a "Bahá'í Esperantista Ligo" (BEL), and have sought the advice of the Hand of the Cause Adelbert Mühlischlegel because of his long interest in Esperanto as an approach to overcoming the language obstacles which confront the world. He is enthusiastic. And we concur that such a League would be helpful to the Faith as well as providing a useful channel for teaching Esperantists the world over.

1. You are free to name the League as you have suggested. The significance of the initials is a happy sign.

2. Responsibility for the League will be exercised by the National Spiritual Assembly of the country in which the secretariat is established. You have suggested that, at the outset, the secretariat of the new League might be in Brazil, under Professor Paul Amorim Cardoso as Secretary. In that case the National Spiritual Assembly of Brazil will assume jurisdiction of the League in whatever ways may be required during Professor Cardoso's tenure.

3. Whenever there are Esperantist events, congresses and the like, in various lands, the National Assemblies of those countries should be informed of the prospective Bahá'í participation, their permission requested and their instructions followed with respect to any Bahá'í activities at the congresses. For example, for the forthcoming *Universala Esperanto-Kongreso* in Belgrade, you should seek the advice and follow the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Austria, which has jurisdiction over Bahá'í activities in Yugoslavia, as well as in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

4. You may, of course, publish whatever literature in Esperanto the League will be able to afford, remembering that each publication must be reviewed and approved by the National Spiritual Assembly in whose area it is to be published. Such an Assembly may well, of course, use members of the League to review the translations. We ourselves shall bear in mind the need for increased literature in Esperanto, but the needs for literature in so many languages is pressing and we cannot hold out hope of providing any considerable amount of financial assistance at this time.

5. A request for special messages by National Assemblies or by the Universal House of Justice may be made by the League as a part of its function of dissemination of the name and principles of the Faith.

Your zeal on behalf of Esperanto as a functional international language will, we feel, be well rewarded by the entry into the Faith of many of your Esperantist associates who will thus take the step from universality in language to the greater universalities of one religion and one mankind. We assure you of our prayers for your labors on behalf of our matchless Cause.

(19 March 1973 to a group of Bahá'í Esperantists) [17]

As English and Persian are the two official languages of the Universal House of Justice we regret that we cannot write to you in Esperanto but we will be glad to enclose an Esperanto translation of our letter for you in view of the fact that you do not understand English well. We hope that it will be possible for Mr. Habibullah Taherzadeh to make such translations if his time allows.

With regard to the enquiry in your letter of 11 Jalál, our understanding of the aim of the Bahaa Esperanto-Ligo when we agreed to its formation was that it was to be an official nonneutral department of the Universal Esperanto Association comprising those Esperantists who are also Bahá'ís with the aim of encouraging collaboration among such friends and promoting the Bahá'í teachings among their fellow Esperantists.

While individual Bahá'í Esperantists are, of course, free to encourage their fellow Bahá'ís to study Esperanto this should not be an activity of the Bahaa Esperanto-Ligo and it should be borne in mind that whereas it is clear that the Bahá'í Faith upholds the principle of an international auxiliary language no decision as to which language this shall be has yet been made.

(10 May 1974 to the Secretary of the Bahaa Esperanto-Ligo) [18]

Further to our letter to you of 2 December 1974, and with reference to your question on the world language, the Universal House of Justice has asked us to draw your attention to the statement of Bahá'u'lláh in the Eighth Leaf of the Exalted Paradise (see Bahá'í World Faith, p. 182): “We have formerly declared that speech was decreed to be in two languages, and that there should be an effort to reduce it into one.”

When the beloved Guardian was asked by an individual believer about the meaning of this passage, his secretary gave the following reply on his behalf:

What Bahá'u'lláh 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 instructions as to the need immediately for an auxiliary language.

(29 December 1974 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [19]

The House of Justice instructs us to say in reply to Mr. ...’s letter to the Local Spiritual Assembly of ... that he should be advised that the time has not yet come for the Universal House of Justice to take any such step as he suggests. There is no doubt of the vital importance of the establishment of a universal language and it will inevitably come about but the believers have more urgent matters to attend to at the present and are asked to concentrate on teaching the Cause and winning the goals of the Five Year Plan.

(2 March 1976 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [20]

The House of Justice realizes that you must sometimes be faced with somewhat embarrassing situations in relation to your fellow-Esperantists since, as Bahá'ís, you are fully aware that, for all its undoubted qualities, Esperanto may well not be the international language that is ultimately chosen, and that it is the concept of an international language that the Bahá'ís are enthusiastic in supporting rather than any particular solution to the problem.

The Guardian’s advice that Bahá'ís must be entirely open about this matter in relation to Esperantists so as to avoid serious misunderstandings and misapprehensions in the future will no doubt be of great assistance to you in your work and enable you to forge ahead with full enthusiasm without, in any way, appearing to sail under false colors.

(6 October 1976 to the Bahaa Esperanto-Ligo) [21]

You are quite correct in stating that 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.

Of course, conditions may produce a development very different from the one just outlined. One of the characteristics of Bahá'í Administration is its flexibility which enables it to deal with unforeseen developments and continually changing conditions. The one certain thing about the choice of an International Auxiliary Language is that the Universal House of Justice does not judge the present time propitious for it to take any action in this regard.

(8 June 1980 to an individual believer) [22]

It is not yet timely for the House of Justice to make a pronouncement in favour of any particular language—the important thing now, in this particular field, is for Bahá'ís to promote the principle. Learning Esperanto, or one of the other proposed auxiliary languages, brings one into touch with people all over the world who are conscious of the need, who are internationally minded, and who may well be attracted to the Faith. Therefore, if you have a particular interest in this subject and an inclination to study Esperanto, you should feel no inhibitions about doing so.

(2 June 1982 to an individual believer) [23]