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The Quest for a Universal Language throughout Human History

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Abstract

The article examines the age-old search of humankind for a universal language, which would make it possible to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers. The authors a) state the importance of the problem, b) analyze how the perspective on the language of common communication changed over time, and c) discuss the reasons for the failures in constructing a global lingua franca on the basis of an artificial language. A conclusion is made that artificial languages have failed as means of overcoming language and cultural barriers because they find it very difficult to answer the challenges of the changing world in all spheres of life due to the absence of any ethnocultural ties. The authors point out the topicality of this area as a subject for academic study.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the English language transformation into the global language arouses an intense academic interest in the theory and practice of the generally accepted language of worldwide communication (Smokotin, Petrova, 2014). At the turn of the 20th century, the world system of languages underwent a sea change: English acquired the status of the global language. The transformation of English from one of a group of international languages used as regional lingua francas into the language of global communication and the emergence on its basis of the Global Lingua Franca has no precedent in the world history of languages. The question about the universal language which would allow humankind to return to the Golden Age of human communication before the confusion of tongues at Babel is not new and has been repeatedly raised by the greatest minds of humanity at critical periods of

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human history. The formulation of the question has been changing from the utopian idea of creating an ideal universal language that could replace "imperfect" languages spontaneously emerging in people's masses and that could make human speech maximally logical and precise to creating concrete projects of artificial auxiliary languages, not with the aim of replacing national languages but for exclusive use in international contacts with the goal of overcoming language barriers and achieving rapprochement of cultures and countries.

In this paper we investigate the following questions:

How did the perspective on a universal language of humanity change over time since the first language projects of the periods of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment?

Why have artificial or constructed languages failed to become languages of worldwide communication and, eventually, achieve the status of a global language?

2. The evolution of the universal language concept from the notion of the "perfect language"

2.1. The first universal language projects in the period of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment

The first attempts at creating artificial or constructed languages for international communication took place in the periods of the Renaissance and, particularly, the Enlightenment, when the positions of Latin as the language of upper classes and the educated circles of Europe weakened, and the emerging plurality of languages threatened to divide educated Europeans into separate groups depending on national languages, which were at various stages of emergence and development. From the point of view of dividing constructed languages into a priori languages and posteriori languages, i.e. languages whose grammar and word stock are created by the authors themselves unlike languages developed on the basis of natural languages, the first universal languages that were called philosophical by their inventors were fully a priori constructions. The authors of philosophical languages projects worked at constructing "perfect languages" on the basis of the fundamental categories of philosophical knowledge. They aimed to achieve rationalizing thought by removing arbitrariness of word forms relative to meanings of words and to ensure the communication of the educated elite in languages free from inaccuracies typical for natural languages due to the absence of correspondence between word form and content. International communication in Middle Ages and in the periods of Renaissance and Enlightenment was a privilege of the upper classes and academic community, and, therefore, the inventors of constructed languages did not set an aim of developing a global language of universal communication for overcoming language barriers standing in the way of international contacts.

Most of the "philosophical languages" of the Renaissance were pasigraphies, that is they had no oral form and were intended for composing texts understandable to speakers of any languages without translation but could not be used for a direct exchange of ideas in spoken communication, which reflects the limitations of the international contacts at those times, when the language of international communication, Latin, was used mainly in written and printed forms. Attempts to construct a perfect pasigraphy, for which a phonetic form could be developed later, continued for a few centuries and led, according to Arika Okrent, to the invention of over 500 universal written languages (Okrent, 2010). The quest for a "perfect language" in those historical periods did not lead to the realization of any of the projects but the method of presenting human knowledge in the form of certain hierarchies proved fruitful as it had brought about the publication of the "Encyclopédie" in the second half of the 18th century by the encyclopédistes headed by Denis Diderot, in which human knowledge was presented in the form of a "figurative system" with three main branches: Memory, Reason and Imagination (Adams, 2006).

With the growth of international contacts in the course of establishing capitalist relations in the 19th century, the division of the world into monolingual nation states, in which foreign language skills were the privilege of upper classes, became an obstacle for further development. During the 19th century, the search for a universal language brought about the development of scores of language projects, which, unlike the philosophical languages of the past epochs, were proposed as languages for communication of all those interested in establishment and support of international connections. Leopold Leau and Louis Couturat in their "Histoire de la Langue Universelle" described 38 projects advanced in the 19th century, starting with Solresol, a musical language invented by François Sudre in 1827. Instead of sounds, which are different in different natural languages, Solresol was based on 7 musical notes that have invariable and universal forms in all languages of the world. The notes in Solresol could be used in 7 different ways, including writing down their international names or musical signs, singing or playing a musical