

One Language and Beyond: A Bahá'í Perspective

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The issue of language plays an important role in the Bahá'í concept of promoting the unity of mankind to a large, global, peaceful, just and ever-advancing society. In the middle of the 19th century, Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, said in His most outstanding book, the Kitab-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book):

O members of parliaments throughout the world! Select ye a single language for the use of all on earth, and adopt ye likewise a common script . . . This will be the cause of unity, could ye but comprehend it, and the greatest instrument for promoting harmony and civilization, would that ye might understand! 18.

So, according to Bahá'u'lláh, the adoption of an international language and common script will prove to be the greatest means for promoting the unity of mankind and the prosperity of its culture.

In 1992 the Universal House of Justice, the highest body within the Bahá'í Community, summarized in an English version of the Kitab-i-Aqdas all quotations of Bahá'u'lláh referring to an international language:

Bahá'u'lláh enjoins the adoption of a universal language and script. His Writings envisage two stages in this process. The first stage is to consist of the selection of an existing language or an invented one which would then be taught in all the schools of the world as an auxiliary to the mother tongues. The governments of the world through their parliaments are called upon to effect this momentous enactment. The second stage, in the distant future, would be the eventual adoption of one single language and common script for all on earth. 19.

In its declaration *Turning Point for All Nations*, published for the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community makes a number of concrete proposals for the development and reformation of the UN. One of the proposals to improve the functioning of the General Assembly relates to the introduction of an international language. Here is the relevant excerpt:

The United Nations, which currently uses six official languages, would derive substantial benefit from either choosing a single existing language or creating a new one to be used as an auxiliary language in all its fora... In addition to saving money and simplifying bureaucratic procedures, such a move would go far toward promoting a spirit of unity.

We propose the appointment of a high-level Commission, with members from various regions and drawn from relevant fields, including linguistics, economics, the social sciences, education and the media, to begin careful study on the matter of an international auxiliary language and the adoption of a common script.

We foresee that eventually, the world cannot but adopt a single, universally agreed-upon auxiliary language and script to be taught in schools worldwide, as a supplement to the languages of each country. The objective would be to facilitate the transition to a global society through

*better communication among nations, reduction of administrative costs for businesses, governments and others involved in global enterprise, and a general fostering of more cordial relations between all members of the human family.*²⁰

The Bahá'í International Community now awaits the formation of an adequate UN forum to launch this proposal, or the creation of an NGO coalition for well-supported organized action.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh and His successor who guided the Bahá'í community, occasionally addressed Esperantists on His travels to the West in the 1920s. On April 5, 1913, He spoke the following words at a gathering of Esperantists in Stuttgart, Germany:

Modern nations experience a great many disturbances and conflicts among themselves whose causes most often originate from misunderstandings based on diversity of language. Out of this was born the idea of the international language. ... Dr. Zamenhof is the initiator of such a language. When this language is taught in all the public schools of the world, the peoples will achieve a superior cultural level. Everyone will have to learn only two languages, the mother tongue and the international language. If the auxiliary language is spread throughout the entire world, many misunderstandings will disappear. ... An international auxiliary language is thus certainly the basis for linking people together, and it has a great capacity to unite the religions. ... Therefore, we must all propagate Esperanto so that great friendship will result among the peoples. Every universal cause is divine ... therefore we can rest assured that the effects of the universal auxiliary language will be divine, if we consider their results.

*We must work and strive to make this language part of the curriculum in all public schools. It is an absolute duty of every living soul to accelerate his or her mastery of the general auxiliary language, for that language will be the means for raising the emblem of universal peace and solidarity.*²¹

*21 In Stuttgart, Germany, April 5, 1913 at a gathering of Esperantists. A provisional translation from the German text published in *Mein Herz ist bei euch. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Deutschland*, pp. 62-66. The talk was also published in an Esperanto translation in *La Nova Tago*, Vol. 6, No. 2, August 1930.*

Many Bahá'ís have followed this advice of 'Abdul-Bahá, not only by developing the awareness for the need of an international language, but also by actively promoting Esperanto. Among the outstanding Bahá'í pioneers of the first decades of this century were Martha Root and Lidia Zamenhof, the youngest daughter of the creator of Esperanto, Ludwig L. Zamenhof. Lidia accepted the Bahá'í-Faith, thus becoming the embodiment of a link between these two movements.

But, of course, not all Bahá'ís support Esperanto or learn it. In our community there is also a concern whether this first attempt is “sterile”, “lifeless” language “without a culture”. Esperantists are well aware of this. And there are also many who favor English as the *de facto* world language, or any other language, especially Persian or Arabic, since Bahá'u'lláh used these languages in His Holy Writings.

Nevertheless, for more than twenty years the Bahaa Esperanto-Ligo (BEL) has been functioning as a bridge between the Bahá'í and the Esperanto movements. It works both internally and externally, i.e. it informs the Esperantists about the Bahá'í-Faith, and the Bahá'í community about Esperanto.

In this respects BEL tries to demonstrate that Esperanto is not at all sterile, lifeless and artificial, but a functioning, lively language with great potential and the first candidate for becoming the future, global, international language.

A current BEL-project is a complete compilation of authorized Bahá'í writings on the principle of an international auxiliary language, about Esperanto and the potential role of other languages. This could serve as a reliable source of information for all serious students who wish to form their own opinion in this matter. Considering the fact that a large proportion of the material deals favorably with Esperanto, it is hoped that this compilation will lead to a more positive consideration of Esperanto on a larger scale in all Bahá'í communities.

So how do we advance towards a new language order? Perhaps it would be best if we viewed this as the development of a new social order rather than a new language order – i.e. language more as a means rather than as an end in itself. This means that it should be viewed and promoted as means for the development of a new social order which entails much more than linguistic issues. An empty stomach or a wounded warrior would not care which language you use as long as you are tending his pain. The new language order should serve the cause of social justice and universal peace. The new language order should encourage and make possible the unity of mankind, a unity which at the same time preserves diversity.

But as you all know we need two hands to be able to clap. The Esperantists should start using the help of other grassroot organizations, working with Bahá'ís and others to find a common ground between many perhaps overspecialized NGOs. If the past two decades has shown something, it is the fact that grassroot organizations and NGOs are becoming more and more influential. Governments have started to recognize that soon they will not be able to implement any policy unless they rely on the trust NGOs enjoy. It is the time for the NGOs to recognize that as well.

Second – and again as discussed this morning – the real change can only come about when a whole generation is trained into that way of thinking. This is only possible through education and that from the primary stages. It can start as extracurricular and gradually become curricular. So let us stretch our hands to like-minded NGOs, and extend our shield of protection against prejudices towards our children.

18 The Kitab-i-Aqdas/The Most Holy Book, §189, p. 88.

19 The Kitab-i-Aqdas/The Most Holy Book, §193, p. 250.

20 *Turning Point for All Nations*. A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations. Bahá'í International Community, United Nations Office, New York, October 1995, p. 8f.