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# WILL ENGLISH BE THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE?

BY ALBERT SCHINZ.

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IN commenting upon ex-President Roosevelt's attempt to reform the English language three years ago, the European press was inclined to imagine in that unexpected step an *arrière-pensée*—the idea of promoting the chances of English as the world's language. Whether Mr. Roosevelt entertained such an idea, we are unable to say; we know, however, that the chairman of the Simplified Spelling Board, Professor Brander Matthews, has such views: "If there is to be a world's language in the future," he said, in an article published some time ago, "it will be English. That much is certain." Assuming that such a thing as an international language would be desirable, he finds that English fulfils almost all the necessary requirements. Not only is it a fact that, thanks to its remarkable vitality and energy, the English race, "a masterful race," is fast gaining supremacy over the whole world, but it is also true that the English language will show most decided advantages when it is compared with other languages from the linguistic point of view. Its vocabulary is half Teutonic and half Latin, and it thus stands, so to speak, midway between the tongues of the two other great civilizing races; moreover, in its structure, English may be considered "the most advanced language, in that it has rid itself of most of its grammatical complexities, the declensions and the conjugations, the arbitrary genders and agreements which still encumber every other tongue." There is one thing, however, which is an actual drawback, and a very serious one, Professor Matthews declares, namely, its spelling.

It is doubtful whether the people who speak of English as if it were to be the international language of the future realize the

different questions involved in this claim, and it seems worth while to examine Professor Matthews's view.

### I.

Let us first turn to what we might call the political aspect of the problem. This is by far the most uncertain aspect of it, since no one knows, in considering political issues, what to-morrow may bring forth.

Much may be said in support of the idea that the English-speaking nations are destined to gain the leading position in modern civilization; we are also ready to admit that in that event English will stand a very good chance of spreading more and more widely.

A great many attempts, all more or less fanciful, have been made to estimate the respective positions of the civilized languages. That of Lewis Carnac, an Englishman, has been often quoted as one of the most trustworthy, and in 1899 he set forth as follows the results of his investigation:

*English is used by 116 million people; Russian by 85 million; German by 80 million.* If the probable increase is calculated at the average rate of the last four centuries, the end of the twentieth century will show the following figures: *English spoken by 640 million; Russian by 233 million; German by 210 million.*

Now, in the first place, nothing proves that speculations as to the future can be safely founded upon events of the past. In fact, it seems almost impossible to solve such problems as this by means of statistics. Suppose, for example, that a census had been taken at the end of the eighteenth century instead of the nineteenth, and that in the same way the four previous centuries had been adopted as a basis in calculating future growth, there is little doubt that the French language, which now does not rank even among the first three, would have come out as the world's language of the future. The German Schwab, indeed, who won the prize *ex æquo* with the famous Rivarol, in answering the questions as to the causes of the progress of the French language, a prize offered by the Berlin Academy in 1784, proposed French as the international language just as Professor Matthews advocates English. Then the French Revolution occurred and upset all prophecies.

After the revolutionary era is over, Russia may show itself

unexpectedly stronger, at a point of development corresponding to that of the United States in 1776. While the Anglo-Saxons have perhaps reached the zenith of their civilization, the Slavs have still before them the full bloom of their power and energy. We must not forget that the last page of their epic literature, that literature which corresponds to "Chanson de Roland" and "Beowulf," was turned not much over one century ago. Moreover, the country has produced a remarkable number of great men, statesmen, writers, scholars, artists, and surely this harvest of strong personalities contains rich promise for the future.

But let us admit, for the sake of argument, that history will develop as suggested by the figures of Lewis Carnac. One thing, at least, is pretty certain—that on the day when English will threaten seriously the other languages, there will be a very strong resistance to it on the part of its rivals. In fact, actual resistance has already begun. The "Pangermanisten" in the Kaiser's empire are agitating the question of the spreading of the German language as well as of others which all aim at the Germanization of the world. Moreover, Germany does not stand alone, and in case of pressing need all those threatened would agree on common action against the common foe. As things are today, the 85 million Russians and the 80 million Germans alone would, as far as numbers are concerned, counterbalance the 116 million English. If we accept the figures given for the end of the twentieth century, namely, 640 millions as against 233 and 210 millions, the other nations joining the movement would again more than make up for the difference. The fear of being absorbed would lead to desperate fights. In fact, such alliances have already been hinted at and even openly proposed. The reader may recall the famous "Projet Chappelier," some six years ago, which was heartily endorsed by the great French linguist, Michel Bréal. Mr. Bréal set it forth in a remarkable article in the "*Revue de Paris*," in which he said:

"The question would be to make between France, England and the United States of America an agreement, not political, not commercial, but linguistic. According to this agreement, English and French would be, in the future, united in the educational institutions of the three countries. The learning of English would be made compulsory in French schools, and French would be made compulsory in England and North America; not only in colleges, but even in the primary schools of all fair-sized cities. The result of such an arrangement would soon be felt.

The two languages, thus designated to serve as a means of communication between 180 million people, would acquire *per se* a great authority. The nations of Northern Europe would have little trouble regarding the learning of English, a language related to their own; and the people of Southern Europe would be as favorably situated with regard to French, which is a Latin language. In this way an irresistible current of opinion would be brought about, which ultimately would overbear all attempt to resist it."

We need not say how this project was received in Germany. And yet, on the third of August, 1906, Professor Diels, the Rector of the University of Berlin, delivered a great speech on the International Duties of Universities, in which he discarded first Esperanto, then Latin, but advocated a linguistic agreement—for scientific purposes only—between French, German and English.

Finally, even admitting that in the end all nations might find themselves in such a position that they would be morally forced to adopt English as the universal language, the time necessary for conquering all resistance is bound to be very long. Therefore, if men find that they really need such a language, they will hardly be willing to wait for the end of our political conflicts in order to solve the question and realize their dream. Some short cut will have to be found.

Such a remedy was proposed, as we all know, in the form of an artificial language, and while Professor Matthews may be perfectly right in his anticipations that the world is not going to adopt any such thing as Volapük or Esperanto, yet we must mention Esperanto here as one more rival which English will have to overcome; and perhaps not the least serious one. Abroad, many advocate the new language—without openly admitting it—chiefly in self-defence against English. And even in America and England, Esperanto is gaining ground surprisingly. Professor Matthews must be aware of the danger to his own solution, otherwise he would not devote a part of his article to fight the idea of an artificial language.

His arguments, however, cannot be said to be convincing; they are at times surprising. He says, for example: "Nothing is more certain than that the majority of mankind can never be made to learn an artificial language;" and with what reason does he support that "more certain"? We quote the author's own words: "History shows us that it is not by reason

that a language spreads abroad and is spoken by increasing millions." We should say that history does not show anything of the kind; one could prove anything by reasoning in this fashion. History would show also that there is no instance of a nation having ever used a flying-machine as a regular means of transportation between different cities; none has done it because nobody so far has been able to construct an air-ship which will work properly. To infer from the fact that humanity did not adopt a bad air-ship, that it will discard also some suitable invention, is a rather questionable deduction.

Professor Matthews perhaps shares with a great many people the belief that artificial languages by the thousand have been offered to humanity. Nothing could be further removed from fact. Except a few adaptations of living languages, only *five* projects in all have been fully worked out, so as to be ready for use in case of acceptance by the world. The making of an artificial language is very different from the mere idea of making one; the mere idea is extremely common and as old at least as the story of the Tower of Babel. Diderot described exactly how the telephone would work more than a century before it was actually invented.

## II.

We come now to the linguistic aspect of our problem. Here we stand on solid ground; nothing need be allowed for speculation based on data which might be all changed by to-morrow.

We will start from the statement of Professor Matthews which every one who has had any chance of considering with some care our chief national tongues will admit; namely, that "English is the most advanced language in its structure in that it has rid itself of most of the grammatical complexities, the declensions and the conjugations, the arbitrary genders and agreements which still encumber every other tongue." But, while admitting this, we may remark, on the other hand, that English has retained, after all, too many grammatical complexities, even some that are no longer found in other languages; such as the distinction between *who* and *which*; *his*, *her* and *its* (French, for instance, very well doing without them); and again, that the so-called simplifications are not always so admirable: you have in no other tongue such awkward and cumbersome constructions as *my beloved ones*, which would not be necessary if there was a way to distinguish the

number in adjectives and participles. But, in the main and since we are concerned here only with languages slowly formed by natural (and therefore always more or less crooked) ways, we repeat that Professor Matthews's contention is perfectly just, and that, as compared with other living languages, English has rid itself of more useless elements than any other.

But is this really all, and is it enough?

Of course, if English is adopted as the international language, it must be taken as it is. Now Professor Matthews does not seem to be well aware of what the difficulties are which strangers have to overcome when they try to learn the language.

There exist in English an unusual number of conventionalities of speech which ought to be observed, if the true, specific spirit of the language is to be preserved. There are, *e. g.*, equivalent expressions like "he went to town on his horse," or "on horseback," or "he rode"; or again "he went in a carriage" or "he drove." Now, as was natural, English-speaking people employ the shorter expressions for common use, the longer ones being kept for the cases only when a more specific meaning must be conveyed. But a stranger will do just the reverse; he will, in a language which is not his own, use an expression which sounds natural to him, *viz.*, "he went in a carriage," because this is a literal translation of a sentence existing in his own language, and he will naturally speak poor English. To master the innumerable idiomatical constructions and terms in English is for a stranger the chief difficulty in acquiring the tongue. A stranger is naturally puzzled when he comes to such a sentence as "he showed him to his room," because in all other languages people say, "he showed his room to him." Then there are such idiomatic expressions as "to dine some one," "to walk a horse."

So to rid a language of its grammatical complexities does not always mean to make it plainer and more consistent, and easier than others. Even if one can discover the meaning after some practice in linguistic gymnastics, it is impossible to credit a person with so much keenness that he will know at once when he can take such short cuts and when he cannot.

Idiomatic style is to be found in all languages, but there is surely more of it in English than anywhere else in our national tongues. This counterbalances to a great extent its apparent simplicity as pointed out by Professor Matthews. What is the



use of doing away with grammatical complexities, if we are to replace them by most tyrannical conventionalities in style?\*

But here comes something probably more surprising still to Professor Matthews and all those who share his view that spelling is the great stumbling-block that may prevent English from becoming the international language. Spelling is not the stumbling-block. In fact, it is just the contrary; it is the so-called erratic English spelling that tends to make the tongue easy to foreigners; reforming the present orthography would render English much harder to strangers, even though it might make it easier for natives. Observe that you will never find a foreigner who has had any trouble with English orthography. Occasionally, if he has a superficial mind, he may think that it is funny; for instance, when he sees a sound expressed in French by one sign *ch*, represented in English by nine different ones: *shine*, *pension*, *sugar*, *issue*, *conscious*, *nation*, *social*, *ocean*, *charade*.† But, whatever he may think of it, this spelling gives him no trouble. Observe further that, if one seldom sees foreigners making mistakes in English spelling, natives, on the contrary, are making them constantly. We know of a college of high standing where examinations in spelling are held even in the senior year, and sometimes conditions in this subject are never passed off. This apparent anomaly interests us; there is a very obvious reason for it. Read over the list of words just quoted from President Wheeler's article; every one of them is a foreign word, or let us rather say an international word. Except for some slight differences in *Schein*, *conscient* and the Arabic *sukkar*, they have even retained their native spelling in English. And, for the vocabulary at least, this is exactly what makes English easy to foreigners. Spell those words according to the universal system of orthog-

\* The writer of this article is French by birth and can speak from experience in this matter. When he began to write in English and asked friends to go over his manuscripts, they would over and over again change a phrase which was grammatically and logically right, and replace it by some idiomatic expression. When asked what was the trouble with the first version, the almost invariable reply was: "Nothing; it is correct; but you cannot use it." Violent protestations, and explanations to the effect that indispensable nuances of thought were sacrificed on this altar of detestable formalism in speech, were of no avail. In several cases the original version was surreptitiously put back before mailing the manuscript, but some magazine editor, or even the printer, would quietly change it again. The fight was finally given up in despair.

† See President B. I. Wheeler's article on "Spelling Reform" in the "Outlook" of October 6th, 1906.



raphy—*i. e.*, almost phonetically—they will no longer be recognized. In the French system, for instance, they would read, according to the dictionary thought the best by some English scientific authorities, namely, John Bellows's: *chaîne*, *pennchenne*, *chougue'r*, *ichyou*, *konnschess*, *néchenn*, *sochel*, *ôchenn*, *charaide*. Up to the last one, they will all at once become entirely new words to a stranger. English will thus become as difficult a language to learn as any other, since the spelling, thanks to which the stranger had at least something to rely upon, will be entirely changed. We know very well that the reformers say that they do not propose such radical transformations. *Now*, it is true, they do not—but later? If spelling reform means anything at all, it means the employment of phonetic spelling as far as possible; and as letters, in English, do not have fixed sounds—and cannot have because they have a different value when they apply to Teutonic words and when they apply to Latin words, as *wine* (German), and *marine*, (French); *learn* (German), and *create* (French), *gird* (German), and *gibbet* (French)—the possibility of a consistent reform would depend upon either one of these two conditions: Agree upon an English alphabet, radically different from the present one, on the system of one letter, one sound; or, spell English sounds with the uniform system of spelling that is in existence in other languages. Nobody ever proposed the first method and probably nobody ever will (although it would be the simpler); so there remains the second, which seems to have been adopted by the promoters of the spelling reform. We have used the term “uniform” to qualify the systems of spelling in European languages (except English); for, after all, the differences are very slight. Take, for instance, the word *nature*, spelled almost alike in French, German and English; it is easily recognizable when pronounced either in French or in German; but when an English person pronounces it, nothing in the sounds produced will remind a Frenchman or a German of the letters contained in the word. To make both pronunciation and spelling match for a stranger, you ought to spell your English word (according to Bellows) “*nétcheur*,” and in German something like “*neetscher*.” Thus, ultimately you are bound to come to something resembling our examples.

Let us draw our conclusion: If the spelling board wishes

to simplify English orthography for English people, it may do a very laudable work; but if it proposes to make English more acceptable to strangers as an international language, it is entirely mistaken and had better stop its campaign at once.

### III.

The difficulty of English for strangers does not lie in its orthography, but in its pronunciation. Abroad, people will constantly say that they can read and write English readily while unable to utter a word or to understand a word of the spoken language; as, of course, *vice versa*, a great many English and Americans can read and write French long before they can understand, or make themselves understood; the other languages are just as difficult for them to pronounce as English is for others. The only difference is that English stands alone with its system, or lack of system, of pronunciation. When a Frenchman knows how to write German, he is at the same time able to speak the language, if not beautifully, at least so as to be understood; the same holds for a German speaking French.

We have not seen anybody yet, either on the side of the reformers, or on that of their opponents, who has called attention to this difference between the spoken and the written language in English; and yet one realizes now the importance of it. The language that is difficult is the spoken language, while the written language remains easier than any other living language. Therefore, if you wish to use English as the world's language, you ought to adopt the form of the written, and not of the spoken language. In other words, you must *reform not the spelling, but the pronunciation* of English: *you must not try to spell English as it is pronounced, but to pronounce it as it is spelled*. You would thus keep the advantages of the language as set forth by Professor Matthews, and get rid of its drawbacks.\*

### IV.

There remains only one more point to examine. For the sake of argument let us suppose that the political and senti-

\* Else one does not see anything but the still more radical step of creating a language, which, after all, as granted implicitly by Professor Matthews, might be even simpler than English. He says that English "has rid itself of *most* of its grammatical complexities"; we can very well conceive of one that would retain only the necessary grammatical elements and drop *all* complexities.

mental reasons against making English the world's language do not exist; let us also ignore for a moment the linguistic difficulties which have just been discussed; even then, one may well be justified in asking whether it would be desirable that English should become the world's language, considering the question, of course, from a purely English standpoint.

No national idiom can expect to become international without undergoing some changes; and one can easily foresee that these changes will not be for good. Their general character can be expressed by the word *Neutralization*.

The individuality of a language, that which gives it its value—*i. e.*, its strength, its beauty, its originality—must be given up, for it must adapt itself to the common needs of a great many different nations situated in different parts of the world. As President Wheeler said, lately, the formation and transformation of a language are due, not so much to the necessity of expressing "what is within one," as of expressing "what will be intelligible to others." Thus, in order to keep in contact with all, to remain "intelligible" to all, English, if ever it came to serve as an international language, could not develop the qualities which are really its own. It would no longer be the strong efficient language we know, but a colorless, neutral sort of speech which might be very useful, like potatoes, but ugly to listen to and poor in expression. The specific qualities now proper to it would be diluted so that they would practically disappear.

Why is it that we like so much our national languages as spoken in past centuries? Why do old English, old German, old French appear so delightfully picturesque and graceful and crisp? Because they were more concentrated languages than our present forms. As time went on, and those who spoke these languages had to make themselves understood by a greater number of people, the process of neutralization began, and gradually became more accentuated, until now we are in our present condition, trying to remedy the lack of "relief" of modern speech by more or less witty "slang."

Consider the vocabulary. In the course of the last few centuries each national language has dropped some words, but has always taken in from abroad a great many more. Here is a table (taken from Brachet et Dussouchet) classifying the 32,000 words contained in the Dictionary of the French Academy:

Of Latin stock.....	3,800
Of Teutonic origin.....	400
By derivation from primitive words, as <i>richard</i> , <i>enrichir</i> , from <i>riche</i> , <i>pauvrette</i> from <i>pauvre</i> , etc.....	7,800
Of foreign and scholarly origin.....	20,000
Total .....	32,000

*Twenty thousand* of foreign and of scholarly origin! Nearly two-thirds of the language that is still universally considered as one of the most beautiful on earth. And the proportion is growing larger, much larger since 1878, the date of the latest edition of the Dictionary. Linguists and artists are constantly publishing protests, although with little hope of success, as they are sensible enough to realize that all efforts will be of no avail until some international language is given to the world, one which will take care of a great part at least of those ugly "intruders."

Now, suppose this process of natural neutralization multiplied tenfold, twentyfold, an hundredfold, and you can imagine what will remain of the purity of the language that will have the very questionable honor of becoming the international language.

What a foolish race we are beholding to-day between those tongues that are trying to outdo each other on the world's market! Do the men who lead in this movement imagine that the world language of to-morrow is going to occupy the same prominent position taken by French when it was called the Universal Language? What a great delusion that would be! French was the universal language for the *élite*, and to serve as such was a great honor. But what people want to-day is a universal language for everybody, for the *masses*, for the *crowd* as well as for the educated classes. Indeed, in present circumstances, far from its being an honor for a nation to provide the world with an international language, it ought to be considered a most undesirable thing. Every country should do all in its power to avoid the disfigurement and flattening of its language by universal usage. Far from trying to give its tongue a chance to become universal, it should do all that is possible to prevent the threatened danger and charitably put the burden on some neighbor's shoulder. The French should favor the aspirations of the Germans in this respect, and English and Americans should agree to introduce Russian in all their schools rather than risk the pearls of their language.

ALBERT SCHINZ.