

In Search of a Universal Language *Past, Present, and Future*

By John F. Copper

Ever since the Tower of Babel, humans have pursued developing a universal language to use to communicate with more—ideally all—people. However, they have been only marginally successful, as indicated by both the history of a large number of failed efforts and the current situation.

Also, these efforts have their detractors. A language becomes larger when it weakens or replaces another language. This often involves “language genocide” and/or represents “language imperialism.” Attaining a universal language may be this on a grand scale.

In fact, many advocates of expanding the use of their language (and their culture, which is connected) believe it is superior to others. Many do not care if they render another language or languages extinct.

Currently, of the approximately 7,000 languages in the world, many are disappearing. According to *National Geographic* magazine, one becomes extinct every two weeks.¹ Most experts anticipate half will be gone by the end of the century. Some say 90 percent.

In any case, several centuries ago, Latin, originally the language of Italy, became the universal language of Europe and modern science. It spread and flourished based on the military, commercial, political, and cultural power of the Roman Empire. The Catholic Church preserved its role after the fall of the empire, though its universal status declined, and eventually Latin fell into disuse.

Before and during the seventeenth century, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, and others began to write in their native languages, not only to give their works broader and more popular appeal, but also to express support for the Protestant Reformation. In addition, they reflected the nationalist sentiments of the time. However, some European scholars still worried that

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having no single universal language impeded scientific research and progress. With nothing promising in sight, they became multilingual, using English, French, and German. That worked to some degree.

On the other side of the world, in Asia, scientific research was done primarily in a single language: Classical Chinese. At least, it was the universal language in some of that part of the world in its written form; in its spoken form (written Chinese is not phonetic), it was not.

Chinese was also to some degree the language of business and commerce in East Asia, but it waxed in importance only when China prospered and engaged meaningfully in trade. Its usage waned beginning in the fifteenth century with China’s isolationism and eventual decline. That continued until modern times.

In the West, German lost its popularity with World War I and also after the war, when many of its top scientists moved to the US due to the rise of Nazism. Both German and French declined markedly after World War II.

Meanwhile, in the late 1800s, there was an effort to construct a truly universal language: Esperanto. Esperanto was a constructed language intended to be easy to learn and also politically neutral. For some, it would transcend nationality and politics, and contribute to world peace. However, due to the fact that it did not have a territorial, cultural, or economic base, it was not a great success. Today, its number of speakers worldwide is estimated to be only a hundred thousand to two million at most. Little is written in Esperanto.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the British Empire greatly expanded the use of English in commerce and its number of speakers. After World War II, English became *the* language of science, as well as business, politics, and culture. The dominance of the United States in these three

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An elementary school teacher helps a boy writing Chinese on chalkboard. Source: Shutterstock stock photo. © Shutterstock.

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science. Meanwhile, a number of countries in Asia and elsewhere have put studying Chinese on a fast track in their universities and business training institutions. English has been demoted in importance.

As a matter of record, the number of people studying Chinese worldwide is double those learning Spanish or German and tenfold those taking Japanese. The government of China announced two years ago that forty million foreigners are studying Chinese; the number has increased exponentially since then. In recent years, China has put a large amount of money and resources into encouraging Chinese-language study—financing Confucian institutes and providing funds for

Mandarin Chinese-language teachers in other countries.

Spanish, and recently, Arabic are popular in the US and European colleges and universities. However, they are essentially regional languages and are not used much in the sciences or technology, and they do not compete with English or Chinese for global status.

Hindi is one of the world's largest languages in number of speakers. Also, India is doing well economically and is making impressive strides in science and technology. But Hindi is not spoken in all of India and is neither spoken nor used very much in other countries.

Which language then, English or Chinese, will come out on top appears to depend on whether or not China's economic boom falters and/or whether the US (and Europe) can get their economies back on track. For now, there are two contending global languages.

It may be some time before there is a prevailing or universal language. In the interim, knowing both English and Mandarin Chinese makes it possible to communicate with around half the people in the world, which one may say is quite a feat in terms of achieving that elusive international tongue—if one believes that having a universal language is a good idea. ■

NOTES

1. Russ Rymer, "Vanishing Languages," *National Geographic*, July 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/73436xn>.

areas ensured that this would remain so. Until the last decade, nearly 98 percent of published scientific articles were written in English, and English was the undisputed language of global trade, culture, travel, and more.

The rise of Asia, in particular China, in the last three-plus decades has enabled Mandarin Chinese to compete as a global language. It has one big advantage: there are three times more native speakers of Mandarin than English (and would-be competitors such as Spanish and Arabic)—noting, of course, that most Chinese also speak a dialect or another version of Chinese, and some don't speak Mandarin well.

In the last few years, Chinese government officials have justified saying Chinese is a language of science due to China registering more patents and producing more scientific articles than the United States, though their quality is not yet as good. In addition, China is increasing its spending on research and development annually by nearly 20 percent, while the US and Europe barely add 3 percent.

Furthermore, Chinese leaders, including top foreign ministry officials, say emphatically that Chinese should be considered a contender as an important business language. China has been growing economically around four times as fast as the US, has become the world's largest manufacturer and trading nation, is number one in the world in foreign exchange (while the US has become a huge debtor), and is the largest purveyor of foreign aid and foreign investments.

Adding to the argument for Chinese, China has worked with Japan (the world's third-largest economy) and South Korea (a major contributor to research in information and communications technology) to standardize the use of Chinese characters in law, commerce, and to some extent

JOHN F. COPPER is the Stanley J. Buckman Professor of International Studies (emeritus) at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. He is the author of more than thirty books.