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AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE FOR MEDICINE OR SEMANTOGRAPHY

A controversy was going on in the Medical Journal of Australia whether Esperanto or Interlingua should be used as the new common language for medicine. My friend, Dr. Douglas N. Everingham joined in with a letter to the Editor which was published in the issue of April 21, 1956 page 676.

In the same issue another correspondent supported the use of basic English. It is not necessary to quote here the foregoing letters concerning Esperanto or Interlingua as the differences and arguments about both these international languages are well known. I publish, therefore, here below only the letter of Dr. Everingham and the following letter about basic English.

Sir,

There is in Sydney, New South Wales, a pioneer of a new medium for international science abstracts. He uses existing international Latin terms and links them by ideographs. Some of the latter are already generally accepted and decipherable in all languages. This ideography has 100 meaning elements in diagrammatic or conventional form, reproducible by simple modifications of a typewriter. It is based on the work of Ogden and Richards, authors of "The Meaning of Meaning" and of "Basic English" (an inter-language of 1000 words). The "grammar" of this "world writing" is an ingenious use of the logical categories obtained by semantic analysis of language. All terms are separated primarily into "photographic", "cinematographic" and "subjective" elements. Considerable self-discipline in thinking is needed to transcribe English into this "semantography", but this semantic self-discipline is an excellent check, so far no otherwise available, on those vague, ambiguous and often misleading phrases which blight scientific publications. Reading the symbols is a much simpler process and can be learnt in a few weeks, as against months (for efficiency) with Esperanto.

The charge of loss of "shades of meaning" can be directed against all systems of expression except one's mother tongue, unless one is a brilliant exponent of a foreign tongue which carries a rich cultural heritage. The more simple, clear, direct and objective the vehicle of expression, the more it will incur the wrath of those who insist on savouring the delicacies of high-flown subjective nuances. Scientific abstracts, however, should surrender these niceties if the choice is between them and ease of transfer of facts. Thus the Esperantist's plea ("Current Comment", M.J. Australia, March 10) is hardly relevant. The "precision of style" claimed by Berlot for Esperanto is not "precision of sense" and is gained at the cost of multiplying difficulties for the learner. Zamenhof feared, like Berlot, to turn national prides against his work if it used exclusively Latin roots, so he concocted a hotch-potch of European roots which affronts logic and is still as alien to the Afro-Asians as Latin would be. Where is the advantage in the Esperanto "birdo" for "bird" instead of the more widely recognized, simpler "avo"? But the biggest objection to Esperanto is the very one which makes Interlingua ("Latine sine flexione") preferred to Latin. Esperanto requires thousands of inflexions for a dubious gain in vocabulary economy. Admittedly this allows a less frequent use of particles. But all languages which succeed in practice as interlanguages are scantily inflected and make free use of particles - for example, pidgin dialects, Malay, Swahili.

Bliss symbols have the enormous advantage of being a logical extension of a process that is already going on around us in traffic signs, indicators

on instrument controls et cetera - they are immediately translated into the mother idiom or even more directly into action. Bertrand Russell interviewed Bliss in Australia and wrote that any person financing publication of this symbolis universalis, which Leibnitz prophesied three hundred years ago, would perform "an important service for mankind". Bliss is always pleased to send cyclostyled examples of applications of his work to medical men for a few pence or a few shillings (cost price) from 5 Maroubra Bay Road, Pagewood.

21 East Street,
Rockhampton, Queensland.
March 23, 1956.

Yours etc.
D. Everingham

Sir,

Why not English? Why not Basic English? See books by C. K. Ogden: "Basic English", "Basic for Science" and others. I have made an attempt to put your bit of Esperanto into Basic English. I did it in a very short time. An expert in Basic English would have done it much better. The English word for "nunas" is "now", not "recent". Every word in this letter (but not "recent", which was yours) and every word but three used for putting the Esperanto into Basic English are in the Basic list of 850 words. "Physiology" is "international" ("Basic English", page 71). "Fibre" is in the Basic Science List ("Basic for Science", page 283). "Uterus" is in an "International Science Word" ("Basic for Science", page 313).

"The pains of birth. Starting-point and distribution of the pains from stretching the neck of the uterus. Work now being done at the bedside and on physiology gives us some new knowledge in causing the pain - (1) the full condition of the uterus (2) the force used by the neck of the uterus in stopping anything from being pushed out of the uterus."

My Esperanto word book has in it a great number of Esperanto root-words and a great number of rules for using them. My Basic word list has 850 Basic words. There are not a great number of rules for using them. The rules are simple. In addition to the 850 words in the Basic framework, there are 50 ordinary international words in everyday use, and there are the English names of days and months and numbers. There are, in addition, for writing on science, 100 words covering the general language of science, and 50 words for any special branch. For reading and writing biology, for example, it will be necessary to have a knowledge of 1000 (850 + 100 + 50) English words. In addition, at a "higher" level there are a number of international science words, a knowledge of which is even now common to men of science all over the earth. Interlingua is Latin made simple by art. But it is no longer Latin. Basic English is English made simple. It is still English.

Melbourne,
March, 22, 1956.

Yours etc.
H. Thomas