

ELF: a historical perspective

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It may seem absurd, or at least paradoxical, to approach ELF from a historical perspective. I believe, however, this first impression to be wrong. A more careful examination of the present linguistic developments shows the approach to be useful as it throws another light on the complexity of the process. This paper will therefore attempt to bring out the **continuity of issues** raised by the use of a *lingua franca* over the last centuries through the examination of the uses and functions of post medieval Latin in Europe on the one hand and of IDO on the other.

ELF and Latin

ELF and Latin share one common feature: their status of ‘universal language’, of remedy against the *Confusio linguarum*. When Latin reached its widest extension it had stopped being vernacular and was considered **universal** in the Western world – i.e. “the world” for Europeans. It was the **second language** of western scholars until the XXth century. There were distribution networks of Latin writings throughout Europe. It served the same function as written classical Chinese, Sanskrit or Arabic, and of course classical Greek at the time when Latin was a vernacular. It was a “mediator”, a “contact language. The definitions of ELF given by Breidbach (2003) “...**direct mediator** between participants in a discourse who would otherwise have to rely on translation or a third party” and by Firth, 1996, in Seidhofer (2005) “...“a ‘contact’ language between **people who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture**, and for whom English is the **chosen foreign language of communication**” apply to Latin. Another common feature between the two languages is that Latin has always been spoken with a **variety of accents**, in spite of the existence of a “reconstructed” version. Even Vatican failed to harmonize pronunciation. It may be said at this point that the major difference between Latin and English is the fact that there are millions of people speaking English as a vernacular and their English can be used as a model. However, beside the present debate over the greater or lesser legitimacy of the various accents in English, a new development is bringing English in its ELF form closer to the situation of post medieval Latin: the **uncoupling** of ELF from its native speakers. This means **distance from a theoretical norm**. Just as few of the post Medieval Latin authors wrote (could write) a perfect “classical” language, few of the non fiction writers using ELF write “classical” English, if such an English can be defined. However, uncoupling a language from its native speakers raises a number of issues. Is EFL going to remain stable - in which case it could be considered a dead language – or is it going to keep evolving, and if yes, will its organic evolution remain linked to that of the vernacular English or will it evolve differently towards another language, the way Romance languages did when Latin stopped being a vernacular (cf la “*questione della lingua*”)? Other questions are linked to the normative function of computer technologies such as writing software, spelling and grammar checkers, text to speech technology, computer translation...

Let's now turn to the history of post-Medieval Latin. In the XVI c. **significant** works of all subjects were written in Latin (Agricola, Copernicus, Galileo, Tycho Brahe, Vesalius... wrote in Latin) and **translations** were often more successful than originals (this was the case for the writings of Paracelsus or Ramée / Ramus for example). In the XVII c. Latin remained a **language of publication** (Kepler), but was mainly a language of translation. Writers such as Descartes, Havers or Torricelli often produced two versions of their writings, one in the vernacular, one in Latin. In the XVIII c. **French** started replacing Latin, however Linnaeus and Newton still published in Latin. It can be seen that the function of Latin over these centuries was similar to that of English over the last 50 years. Things changed in the XIX c. New discoveries and technological developments implied new terminologies, new journals, congresses that could not be dealt with in Latin as too few scholars were now able to write usefully in Latin and new terminologies meant large numbers of neologisms. The *Confusio linguarum* returned: in 1800, in Europe, scientific books were published in 10 or so languages, in **1900 in over 20 languages**. Congresses had been held in 3 languages. In 1900 scientists had to cope with **6 or 7** languages. A decision was taken to have an **international auxiliary language (IAL)** in order to solve the problem of scientific information exchange, spread knowledge, answer the needs of international business and communication and spread concord among peoples. Except perhaps for the last item, EFL seems to have the same goals.

ELF and IDO

The Delegation responsible for the selection of the best IAL had **three choices**. Latin, a national language and an artificial language (*a posteriori* language based on existing natural language).

1. In the case of Latin, a return to classical Latin was not considered. A **new simplified standardized Latin**, without declensions, inflections or exceptions, with neologisms was considered more adapted. The specialists thought that most educated people had studied Latin, and that this new Latin would be stable. A great number of Latins were created between 1883 and 1912.

It can be seen that a number of the concerns voiced by the speakers and users of ELF are already expressed here: simplification of the original natural language, creation of neologisms, (greater) stability (in the case of EFL due to the uncoupling of the language from the vernacular).

2. The second choice was a **national language**: with three candidates **English, French, German**. This choice was rejected as the countries refused to standardize their language and claimed that the social spread of international exchanges would lead to diminished quality of message content through impoverishment of the language used. This last argument is often expressed by opponents of ELF.

3. The third choice was adopted: an **artificial language**. It seemed to be the fairest and most democratic choice. It would be a rational language, simple to learn (it was to use most international Indo-European roots) and easier to learn than a natural language. It was thought it would foster international understanding through communication. Above all it would be a scientific tool allowing a perfect match between language and thought. The choice was spectacularly successful: 116 systems were developed between 1880 and 1914, the most

famous being *Esperanto*, the language of the Russian **Zamenhof**. Famous linguists were involved: Meillet, Jespersen, Bréal...

In January 1901, a **Delegation for the adoption of an International Auxiliary Language was appointed to** chose a language, that was to be called IDO (*International Delegation: ID*). Its **charter said:** an IAL is **indispensable**, it must **not be a national language**, it should be **adapted to scientific and philosophical exchanges**, it must be **easy to learn** for an European with an average level of education. Here again it can be seen that the charter could apply to ELF. The delegation appointed a committee of experts including **Léopold Léau**, a mathematician, author of: “*Une langue universelle est-elle possible ? Appel aux hommes de science et aux commerçants*” and **Louis Couturat**, a philosopher. IDO is explicitly supposed to answer the needs of science and commerce. Just as ELF.

Between 1901 and 1907 the Delegation represented 310 learned societies and international congresses, and collected 1200 signatures (academicians, scholars...). It received a wide support from Europeans science circles (e.g. Bergson...). In 1907 the *Delegation* presented the results to the *International Association of Academies* - that refused to take a decision. The Delegation appointed a select committee that auditioned 180 creators, chose **Esperanto**, but demanded it be simplified. The simplification of Esperanto was entrusted to 6 delegates: 2 linguists - de Courtenay (Russian) and Otto Jespersen (Danish) - the Nobel Prize winner for chemistry Wilhelm Ostwald (Latvian/German), the Esperanto specialist De Beaufront (French), and 2 organizers, Couturat, Léau. However, the **Great War** broke out and put an end to the International Auxiliary Language. IDO is now largely forgotten.

IDO is the only artificial language created by scientists, collectively, to “serve science” and built scientifically to be **utilitarian** and **flexible**. Its linguistic principle was **maximum internationality** and logical derivation of words for **maximum intelligibility** by Europeans (based on statistics).

IDO and ELF have similar aims: serving science and ensuring maximum intelligibility and internationality (even though not through the same means). However, ELF is not an *a posteriori* language, only a simplified language. Thus, ELF is half way between the new Latin (first solution) and the artificial language IDO (the third solution), which raises the question: Is ELF an **avatar** of IDO?