

The World's Tongue

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Abstract

The purpose of “The World’s Tongue” is to examine the concept of a “lingua franca” in a globalized age and form an opinion on if the world should try to establish one. The paper argues *against* the idea of establishing a lingua franca through various analyses. The first is by comparing the lingua franca to the pidgin and creole to highlight similarities and differences while establishing a background for how languages function. The second is by analyzing the attempt to create a lingua franca through a case study of Esperanto, outlining where it both succeeds and fails. The third method is then comparing and outlining the problems and benefits with a real language being used as a lingua franca, specifically English. From these analyses that discuss power imbalances, nationalist attitudes, language’s relationship with culture and economics, the paper concludes that actively trying to establish a lingua franca would prove to be more problematic than worthwhile, and that other alternatives should be explored.

Keywords:

Lingua Franca, Pidgin, Creole, Globalization, English, Esperanto, Language, Culture

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Humanity reached a new milestone in 2022 as its global population surpassed the 8 billion threshold (Worldometer). This fact, argued to be progress, parallels and diverges from what it has grown with and can attribute its growth to: technology. The uptick historically coincided with the prominence of technology, for the convenience that came with it facilitated lives in which families could have and raise children. This correlation is best shown by examining the following milestones in which the global population grew: 1 billion in 1804, 2 billion in 1930, 3 billion in 1960, and then 4 billion in 1974 (Worldometer). This of course begs the question of where humanity's progress has diverged from technology's. To answer that, one must zoom out to an Earth sized scale to recognize that humanity is lagging, for it has merely fumbled into the age of globalization.

“Globalization,” as defined by National Geographic’s Encyclopedia, “is a term used to describe how trade and technology have made the world into a more connected and interdependent place,” and something that one could argue is only as old as the internet, yet some say coincides with the Silk Road. Humanity has found cross cultural connections and has been able to exchange ideas, news, and discourse in an instantaneous manner; however, it has also found a problem—and possible solution in this renaissance. There is the problem of *how* they will exchange ideas with each other. What language will people meet in to have a mutual

understanding? There have been many contenders for what will be referred to as the global “lingua franca,” or “common language” in layman’s terms. If everyone could be on the same page, then it could streamline processes and unite people; at least that is the quick and optimistic result that some would anticipate. However, pushing for a global lingua franca is much more nuanced and possibly problematic than the current problem of not having one. To understand this, it is essential to interrogate the concept of a language itself through the lingua franca before determining whether all the world should speak in one tongue or not.

The lingua franca must not only be defined to understand it, but it must be differentiated from its cousins—the pidgin and creole—as well. The pidgin is the simpler of the two cousins, for its creation arises from essential transactions, which would fall in line with what linguists refer to as “polygenetic theory” (Oder p. 6). This traces back to when foreign trade was first possible, and two traders would need to come to a mutual understanding despite one speaking Haitian and the other speaking French. A pidgin is then derived from both languages, although it may pull from one more than the other.

A pidgin will usually pull more from the language that has more economic and colonial power. An example of this is shown in a Nigerian pidgin in Oder’s paper in which “I don’t know” becomes “I no no.” (3). This demonstrates how the pidgin may sometimes appear as one group conceding to another’s language rather than a pidgin being an even compromise between the two. This unfortunately contributes to negative attitudes towards pidgins in which the group with more power will view the pidgin as a clumsy grasp at English in this case rather than a separate category of language. This attitude will be explored later, for it is a common demon between all three of the linguistic terms.

While it is the nature of a pidgin to have a smaller vocabulary set and provide less room for linguistic diversity and nuance in its meaning, it is still a type of language that must be acknowledged for wholesale's sake. It must doubly be acknowledged when discussing the creole, which could be seen as the more developed version of the pidgin. One of the main differences between the two is that “pidgins have no [native] speakers, while creoles [do]” (Oder 2). To contextualize this, imagine the traders who speak a pidgin for solely trading purposes. It is not their first language, but they speak it in order to conduct business. Realizing the economic opportunity that is tied to speaking the pidgin, they may use that language at home with their children so that their children can acquire it easily and be set up for economic success. This child is now a native speaker of the language, yet he or she will also be around other community members who may speak only one of the languages that the pidgin pulls from. The child will pull from both sources and add to the pidgin-language so that he or she may communicate more effectively, thus expanding and refining the pidgin into a creole. Consider that the child is also part of a generation of children who are doing the same thing and speaking with each other. The creole will keep building and one day become standardized, as in the case of Jamaican Patois: the creole language of Jamaica.

A lingua franca is a bit more cut-and-dry than its cousins. Merriam Webster defines it as “any of various languages used as common or commercial tongue among peoples of diverse speech.” An example would be a German travelling to Italy and speaking English with everyone there. Even a German speaking English while being in the U.K. would demonstrate the use of a lingua franca, for the German has a different native tongue. What is crucial to note in comparing the lingua franca with its cousins is that lingua francas are often already established languages

and do not require compromise or new interpretations of languages; it is not as easily influenced. This will play to both its advantage and disadvantage.

A case study of Esperanto will demonstrate the failures of a lingua franca and provide a much-needed reference point when discussing English: an unofficial lingua franca for much of the world (Sheviakova). It is important to start with the origins of Esperanto and engage with it as a concept. Esperanto is an artificial, constructed language, yet it is not the first. In fact, the idea of a constructed language dates all the way back to the Enlightenment. There was a need to communicate scientific ideas internationally; therefore, minds like Descartes and John Wilkins “proposed symbolic systems to represent scientific ideas” and “real characters” who would establish standards for science that “escape the perceived constraints of natural languages,” respectively (Gledhill). This was the birth of the “artificial language,” a language with monolithic meanings that do not sway to nuance or multiple interpretations.

Esperanto was developed from this premise and *hope* by its creator: Dr. Ludwig Zamenhof. Born in 1859 in Bialystok, Poland, Dr. Zamenhof was born as a member of multiple communities, for Poland was then a part of the Russian Empire. Reportedly teased at a young age for his differences—one of which being that he could speak Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and German—Zamenhof was moved by his experiences to write a play titled “The Tower of Babel,” in which the Tower of Babel was being built in Bialystok. The tower’s construction ran into complications that arose from cultural differences. He wrote this at the age of ten, which should be noted as evidence of how cultural differences affected his life. For the next portion of his life, he went to school and studied English, German, Latin, French, and Greek, giving him a wide set of tools and experience to see his dream into fruition: to establish a new language as an equal

speaking ground away from the problems that arise in natural languages and the cultural differences associated with them (Wincewicz).

Dr. Zamenhof published a language guide and book in multiple magazines. The version published in 1887 was pen-named under “Doktoro Esperanto,” a pen-name meaning “Dr. Hopeful.” It was from this pen name that the language was dubbed “Esperanto” (Wincewicz).

Esperanto attempted to be the solution to the supposed problem in a globalized age; it was created for the sole purpose of being “a means of communication for people from all over the world” (Gryazin). It pulled from multiple established languages and only featured 16 grammatical rules so that it would not—theoretically—be too difficult to learn for people adopting it. Furthermore, Dr. Zamenhof created the rules to be as regular and simple as possible, meaning that Esperanto lacks grammatical exceptions that other languages have. For instance, Esperanto only has one definitive article: “la” (Gledhill). There are no indefinite articles or gender associations with articles, just “la.” Spanish and French speakers may also note that “la” is present as the feminine version of “the.” Speaking of correlations and influences, Esperanto is said to be primarily influenced by Slavic, Latin, Greek, French, English, and others. In that sense, it is the creole of all creoles, and it would even address issues of favoritism—in theory. Even the name “Esperanto” is derived from “esperi,” which means “one who hopes,” which in this case refers to Zamenhof’s idealistic aspirations. However, some of the following examples will demonstrate Esperanto’s “influence” from other languages (Glosbe):

Esperanto	Derivation with Source Language	English Translation if Necessary
Sarko	Shark (English)	
Dolpheno	Dolphin (English)	
Dankon	Danke (German)	Thank you
*Piedbati	Pied (French)	To kick

*Piedbati literally translates to “foot” for “pied” and “hit” with bati—so “Foot-hit.” “Pied” is the word for foot in French.

There was some interest behind Esperanto, but it failed to become the global lingua franca, as proven by the language this paper is being published in. The equality it strove for is already moot by merit of it pulling from Romantic languages, meaning the language already lends itself to be more easily learned by those who speak English or French for example. While its rules are straightforward and can be learned rather quickly, there is no denying that a native English speaker will attain mastery quicker than a native Korean speaker. Furthermore, attempts to establish it as a lingua franca were shot down by the French in 1923, who feared that such attempts would dethrone French as the lingua franca of the time (Gryazin). After this, learning Esperanto became little more than a fun hobby for language enthusiasts.

It failed for numerous other reasons as well, but some are unique to the fact that it is an artificial language. For example, Esperanto on its own lacks cultural significance. This one problem is actually multi-fold. The primary problem in it being artificial and lacking cultural significance is best demonstrated by comparing it to a pidgin or creole. A pidgin arises out of necessity and grows into a creole through generations of use and added meaning. Esperanto, as a concept, inverses that by creating meaning within itself first and acquiring speakers second. There is little room for speakers of Esperanto to build upon, although some have done so in a series of conventions with Dr. Zamenhof himself in 1905 (Gledhill). The convention established “unofficial” forms of the language that are permissible so long as they do not break the 16 rules or do away with the 900 essential words that Zamenhof created at the beginning.

Furthermore, cultural context is crucial for building a connection between the speaker and language, for the two are deeply intertwined with one another. The culture people are raised in and exposed to informs their processing of inputs and cues into perceived meaning. This is true for both spoken language and cultural events. If someone hits their glass with their spoon at a social gathering, then people will naturally quiet down and anticipate a toast without the speaker having to say, “I want to make a toast.” As for language, the same translation differs across languages. For example, “I’m good” is used as a response to the ever-common question of “how are you?” even though the response is technically incorrect but accepted, nonetheless. In French though, the same question, “comment ça-va?” would not be answered with a literal “I am good,” or “je suis bon,” for saying that would actually refer to one’s sexual prowess; one should instead say “je vais bien,” which literally translates to “I’m going well,” but is understood as “I am well.” Even within the same language, a biscuit is different depending on whether one is in the United States or United Kingdom.

Tying this back to Esperanto, the lack of an established culture is a problem for learners and masters of Esperanto alike. A learner’s perceived meaning of a word in Esperanto may differ depending on where they are from. Li cites Arnold Pitt, an editor of *Esperanto Teacher*, who states in an interview that the word “demokrata” in Esperanto means something different in the East than in the West, although the differences were not elaborated on (7). What is worth noting in this example though is that since Esperanto is the attempt to concede to many languages, then the question of “who is right” must be addressed but seemingly cannot be. English does not have this issue, for it has an established history and culture to inform one about the meaning of words; a wide consensus of meaning overrides any negotiation between speakers.

The established history and culture must further be noted in the case of why Esperanto failed, for this is arguably at the core of what makes an incentive for a learner to adopt a language. Due to its limited adoption, Esperanto has very little to show for itself in terms of production; it would be a phenomenon if one could name a book, song, or movie originally produced in Esperanto. Another note is that Esperanto does not have one source to pull from due to it being separate and distinct from all its sources as a means of being an equal ground. That is to say that it is hard to build meaning from something this late in civilization, for anything that may be produced may also just be traced back to another influence. Look at the concept of a witch as an example. A witch exists in many different forms in many different cultures, so maybe the Esperantists could write a story with an original witch. However, if this witch does anything “unique,” then parallels will be drawn to other sources and discount the notion of an Esperantist culture. If she is obsessed with youth, then she will be compared to Maleficent; and if she eats kids, then people will recall Hansel and Gretel. Make her green and now she resembles the Wicked Witch of the East in *The Wizard of Oz*. Despite this Esperanto media *does* exist, but not in the public eye. This is not to suggest that there are no native Esperanto speakers either, but it is to note that they exist in futility by merits of the artificiality of the language they endorse. It is ultimately idealistic and incompatible with how the world is currently operating.

If Esperanto gains more presence or produces more media associated with it, then it may attract more speakers. However, the current lack of both does not only impede it from gaining more speakers, but it is actively harming it. The lack of presence also means the lack of exposure to the language, which is arguably at the core of language learning. No mastery of a tongue was forged in a classroom alone or by only completing Duolingo. One must become fully immersed in the language to absorb it, which is next to impossible when Esperanto is not tied to a physical

place; otherwise, the mind will naturally switch back to the native tongue. Esperanto cannot grow by just existing in hobbyist homes and online forums; it must exist in a community.

Finally, the lack of presence is harmful by virtue of language being competitive.

Language must be understood to be competitive on many grounds. It is competitive at the individual level, for a speaker must dedicate time and practice to attain mastery of any language aside from their native tongue. Time and practice are *spent*, and knowledge of a language is *consumed*, meaning language exists in a state that is very similar to a competitive goods and services market. People will not be incentivized to learn Esperanto when it only has 2,000,000 global speakers: which is 0.025% of the global population (Gryazin). With the limited amount of time people have, they will naturally learn what is most beneficial or intriguing to them.

This point is directly tied to external incentives. It is similar to internal incentives, but it is more about what the selling points are of the language itself rather than what it means to the person. An example would be as follows: a language learner is considering learning English. English has been the unofficial—official, now just official, language of the United States, which is the most economically advanced country by GDP per capita. English's tie to that is an external incentive, but if the learner is wanting to learn a language for reasons of having more economic or career opportunities, then that is an internal incentive. Maybe a person's job is requiring that they have a certain proficiency in English, so they go and take classes. That is an external incentive that is being pushed onto the person. Another example could be tied back to Esperantists, who primarily have internal incentives to learn the language on the grounds that they find it fun and intriguing.

It is essential at this point in the paper to pivot to discussing the “rising lingua franca,” and step into the paper as a person with anecdotal experience. In the summer of 2024, I went abroad and earned my certification to Teach English as a Foreign Language, or TEFL for short. During my time in the program, I taught English to a wide variety of people and was told by people in the program about the boundless opportunities in the TEFL field. English was referred to as the “language of business,” and most graduates in my month-long program are now employed in Prague as Teachers of ESL. Furthermore, I have investigated the TEFL job market and found websites such as EPIK, a website sponsored by South Korea’s Ministry of Education that aims to bring qualified ESL teachers to the country. In short, being able to speak English is in demand, and makes it a contender for being *the* lingua franca.

Of course, my anecdotal experience does not encompass all of reality, and English has other contenders to answer to. However, the claim that English is the most spoken language has also been asserted by the International Center for Language Studies’ statistics as of late 2024—if not with an asterisk. English has 1.52 billion speakers, but only a quarter of those are native speakers, and it is spoken in 186 countries. The second most spoken language has the most native speakers: Mandarin. 941 million of the 1.1 billion speakers are native speakers, ranging across 83 countries. The math behind this statistic coupled with another statistic reveals why English has been said to be the rising global lingua franca; English is featured in 52.1% of content on the web. The second most featured language is the fourth most spoken in the world: Spanish, which is featured in 5% of the internet.

This paper could go on for pages as to why other contenders for the title of “global lingua franca” are less equipped to do so, but it is more efficient to point out why English is the top contender. It has already been established that English has the largest internet share and global

spread—due to many colonial efforts of nations such as Great Britain and the United States—but it must be noted once again that English is the primary, and *recently* official, language of the United States. The United States is the most economically advanced country in the world by both nominal GDP and GDP per capita (Investopedia). Perhaps it is by this virtue that The United States has the top two companies in the entertainment industry by market cap: Netflix & Disney (FinViz). This would suggest that much of the media that is being produced or streamed is doing so in English, although dubbed and subtitled versions exist. Netflix additionally makes efforts to produce original content platforming other languages and cultures such as Squidgame. However, this suggestion adds an external incentive for language learners, especially those who may aspire for creative work or entertainment-based work. Furthermore, English is one of the six official languages of the United Nations, providing a foundation for it to be used on a geopolitical platform.

Assuming English is the rising global lingua franca, it must be assessed for both its pros and cons before the paper can form a concluding opinion. English, in comparison to Esperanto, is a real language with leagues of extra meaning that can be conveyed by virtue of it being more complex. A brief example would be that English speakers could distinguish between a “manor,” “mansion,” and “large house,” yet all those words can translate to “domego” in Esperanto (Glosbe), demonstrating how the simplicity of the language limits precise communication. English can function as a “neutral speaking ground” just as Esperanto aims for in the case that it is the second language of both speakers. An example of this is found in Nigerian politics. Nigeria has three big, and 200 smaller, languages, yet all its politics are completed in English so that one group’s tongue is not favored over the other two (Udofot). It must also be noted that English’s

presence in Nigeria is a direct result of colonization, so it should be viewed as making the best within somber parameters rather than a perfect solution to a problem.

This merits the mention of *the* problem with English, or any real language, as an “established” lingua franca. English is one of the largest culprits in breeding supremacist ideology. One could cite all colonial efforts and the erasure of colonized groups as evidence for this, but the scythe of culture can swing on smaller scales. A contemporary example from 2025 is outlined in an opinion piece by John McWhorter in the New York Times. McWhorter responds to Trump’s executive order that aims to establish English as the official language of the United States. This seems harmless at first considering English is the dominant language, but dominance can include tolerance, whereas officiality does not. Setting English as the standard language could mean that immigrants and citizens are unable to access essential documents in their native tongues, which they were able to do when the United States lacked an official language. This would bar them from being able to execute all the same rights as their English-speaking peers. McWhorter further adds that “there’s the claim that this order will compel immigrants to learn English, and the implication that people who fail to do so are shirking a basic American duty.” This quote demonstrates how language and cultural identity can be used as weapons against people who do not fit the bill—in this case American. This is nationalism.

Now apply this across the world.

Using a real language as the global lingua franca seems to cause more problems than it solves. Picking any one language would be an indirect declaration of it being above the rest. However, adopting Esperanto is far-fetched and comes with its own set of challenges. This then begs the question of what the solution is. The solution will not be found at the end of this paper,

nor will it be found at the end of the decade. What must occur is an incorporation of all languages so that cultural meaning and unique expressions are not lost. That will of course take decades and generations of work to see to fruition. It will only be through active language acquisition that people will adopt new meanings and exchange those with one another. If this is done on a long enough timeline, then all points may eventually converge into one so that Esperanto may occur naturally. A collaborative effort to platform different cultures and reach beyond borders, both physical and lingual, may yield a future worthy of becoming “esperi” like Zamenhof.

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