

■ Here are arguments in favor of English for use as a world language.

ENGLISH OVER THE WORLD

Very often you may see in the papers signs of the progress of English toward world-wide use. These forecasts are accompanied by emotional outbursts ranging from hisses to hurrahs, for there is nothing which arouses the stronger intellectual passions as much as the question of how we shall speak.

Frequently these bits of news take the form of reports, written in the quaint journalistic style of our day, that Mexico or Persia or Chile has banned or will ban our English talkies for fear its native children will come to think our tongue more agreeable than their own. Now and then the items merely inform the public that English has been adopted as the official language of another international gathering. One and all they point to the world-domination of English, like it or not as you may.

The four-word peace plan, "Make Everybody Speak Eng-

lish," which Henry Ford formulated some years since, is not logically a reason for the universal use of our tongue. Any language, if spoken everywhere, would make for world peace. It is not numbers, nor politics, nor trade, nor the talkies — the four reasons most frequently given — which make English a good language for the world use. These are merely the accidents of a beneficent fate. They do not penetrate the true inwardness of the matter.

First, numbers. We are told that 220,000,000 people either use or understand English, as compared to only about 120,000,000 for French and 110,000,000 for German, and these numbers are advanced as if they really meant anything. But unless English is in itself a good and worthy language for the world to use, all the numbers in the world won't make so.

Second, politics. The World War unquestionably

enhanced in tremendous measure the prestige of the two great English-speaking commonwealths. Our local boys have been financially advising most of the governments there are, and they have made good, too. Hand in hand with American advisers have gone British diplomats, and together they have done much toward bringing about world peace according to the Ford recipe. But — is English a good language for everybody to speak?

Third, trade. The American dollar has swept the money markets of the world, and the pound sterling is not far behind it. Did you follow the stock reports in the late crash — of, didn't you! — and did you notice how securities all over the globe were affected? It was a touching tribute to our financial leadership. But if "dollar" is not a better word than "franc" or "lira," what do these facts matter?

Finally, talkies. Talkies made in Hollywood are riding triumphant over all the foreign bans, propagandizing the English language, American edition, wherever the sun shines. They may well

prove the most effective instrument yet invented for spreading English.

But ought English to be spread? It is intrinsically a better language than French or German or even Chinese? This is the moral question which lurks behind the facts, and this is the question which we must now consider. Back in 300 B.C., to take a parallel instance, Hellenic Greek became a world language. It supplanted to a large extent many local tongues, among them the Hebrew and Aramaic of Palestine. Yet either was incomparably a better language, than Greek, simpler, more effective, easier to learn and to use. Fate is playing on the nations today no such shabby trick as when she compelled the Jews of Palestine to learn Greek.

It is a curious fact that language as we now know it develops not from the simple to the complicated, but the other way round — from the complicated to the simple. Whenever we can trace more than one stage in a language's history we find that the earlier speech is more difficult, more unwieldily. Latin is complication

personified compared to three of its modern children, French, Spanish and Italian. So far as modern Greek has changed from Classic Greek, it has simplified. Coptic Greek has lost many of the complications present in the tongue of the hieroglyphs.

To be sure, we have never met a language a-borning, and so we can only guess that somewhere a stage of simplicity must have preceded those complications upon which our earliest gaze rests. But that is a matter of speculation. What we do know as a present linguistic law is this: time simplifies a tongue. Gradually the language begins to forsake its numerous declensions and conjugations, its optative, cohortative, predicative moods, and all the other flummeries of primitive speech. Gradually there begins to emerge a lean, efficient dialect.

This simplification has not always been considered a linguistic virtue. The proper adjective to use in describing antique languages was *rich*, and for more recent developments, *degenerate* or *decadent*. What was

the Greek verb if not rich, with the hundred varying dresses it might wear? And does not the modern English verb display a decadence verging upon shamelessness with only two?

It was in 1892 that a Danish scholar, Otto Jespersen, punctured this legend with a book called *Progress in Language*; and since then "decadence" has had things all its own way. And after all, why not? Can you picture yourself selecting among the 12 possible forms of *bonus* when you might be using the single word *good*?

So the first reason why English is the best world language is that it has carried this simplification of forms farther than has any other modern language. In German *good* still has six dresses to wear, and in French four. The German verb still counts its forms by the trunkful, and the French verb is not much better. Danish alone of modern languages has approached English in its formlessness.

A second qualification, scarcely less important, is impurity. English is probably more impure than any

other tongue, ancient or modern. English picks up words from any language at all, and by the process it has succeeded in making itself international. Scarcely any foreigner learns English without finding many old friends in the new vocabulary. Impurity is a good characteristic for a world language. English deserves universal use because it is formless, impure and wordy. Wordiness is not usually considered a virtue any more than impurity is; but words are the wealth of the English, and the riches of its wordhoard are only paralleled by the riches of the Anglo-American nations. No user of our tongue need be repetitious; he can vary his words with synonyms or near-synonyms in almost endless va-

riety. *The New Oxford Dictionary* contains almost half a million words.

Has English no defects, to set against this formidable array of virtues? Yes, indeed. We have a bad alphabet, a tough pair of articles, *a* and *the*, and a difficult idiom in prepositions. But on the other hand, we have a natural gender, an easy sentence order, and a splendid tolerance of almost any accent or grammar so long as the idea it expresses be good. Balancing defects against virtues, we may reasonably conclude that the applauders of World English have a sound linguistic justification for their choice, unrecognized as this fact may be in their eyes. — *By Fanet Rankin Aiken, condensed from Sept. 1930 Bookman.*

THE FEVER

Demetrius would at times tarry from business to attend to pleasure. On such occasions, he usually feigned indisposition. His father, coming to visit him, saw a beautiful young lady retire from his chamber. On his entering, Demetrius said, "Sir, the fever" has left me."

"I met it at the door," replied the father.