

'Abdu'l-Bahá on the Value of a Universal Language

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain. —

(Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Íqán)

Chapter IV

'Abdu'l-Bahá on the Value of a Universal Language

His Excellency 'Abdu'l-Bahá, addressed the Paris Esperanto group on February 12, 1913, at a banquet which was accorded him at the Hotel Moderne in that city. M. Bourlet, President of the Paris Esperanto Society, in introducing 'Abdu'l-Bahá, said that one of the principles of the great world religion which he was promulgating, was the establishment of a universal language.



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There was a deep silence as 'Abdu'l-Bahá arose. His remarks were punctuated by cheers as he walked up and down the banquet hall, stopping to emphasize with frequent gesture. He spoke in Persian, M. Hippolyte Dreyfus of Paris interpreting into French. Here and there one noted that the French translation was undergoing still further interpretation by Esperantists for the benefit of neighbors who did not understand French but knew Esperanto, — the occasion itself offering a noteworthy argument for the imminent need of a universal tongue.

'Abdu'l-Bahá said: Human undertakings are divided into two kinds — universal and personal.[pg 142]

Those efforts which create general interest are universal; their results are likewise universal for humanity has become interdependent. The international laws of to-day are of vast importance, for as international politics bring nations nearer to one another — and thus promote a bond of oneness which acts as a magnet to attract the divine confirmations — the results and benefits are limitless. Therefore, let us say that every universal cause is divine and every personal matter is human or limited.

The universal light for this planet is from the sun and the special electric ray which to-night illumines this banquet hall appears through the invention of man. In like manner the activities which are trying to establish solidarity between the nations and infuse the spirit of universalism in the hearts of the children of men are like unto divine rays from the sun of reality and the brightest ray is the coming of the universal language. Its achievement is the greatest virtue of the age for such an instrument will remove misunderstandings from amongst the peoples of the earth and will cement their hearts together. This medium will enable each individual member of the human family to be informed of the scientific accomplishments of all.

The basis of knowledge and the excellencies of endeavor in this world are to teach and to be taught. To acquire sciences, and to teach them in turn, depends upon language, and when the[pg 143] international auxiliary tongue becomes universal it is easily conceivable that the acquirement of knowledge and instruction will likewise become universal.

No doubt you are aware that in the past ages a common language shared by various nations created a spirit of solidarity amongst them. For instance, thirteen hundred years ago there were many divergent nationalities in the Orient. There were Copts in Egypt, Syrians in Syria, Assyrians and Babylonians in Bagħdád and along the rivers of Mesopotamia. There existed among these peoples rank hatred; but as they were gradually brought nearer through common protection and common interests, the Arabic language grew to be the means of intercommunication and they became as one nation. They all speak Arabic to this day. In Syria, if you ask any one of them, he will say, "I am an Arab," though he be a Greek, an Egyptian, Syrian or Jew.

We say "this man is a German, the other an Italian, a Frenchman, an Englishman," etc. All belong to the great human family yet language is the barrier between them. The greatest working basis for bringing about unity and harmony amongst the nations is the teaching of a universal tongue. Writing on this subject fifty years ago, His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh declared that complete union between the various nations of the world would remain an unrealized dream until an international language was established.[pg 144]

Misunderstandings keep people from mutual association and these misunderstandings will not be dispelled except through the medium of a common ground of communication. Every intelligent man will bear testimony to this.

The people of the Orient are not fully informed of the events in the west and the west cannot put itself into sympathetic touch with the east. Their thoughts are enclosed in a casket. The universal language will be the master key to open it. Western books will be translated into that language and the east will become informed of the contents; likewise eastern lore will become the property of the west. Thus also will those misunderstandings which exist between the different religions be dispersed. Religious prejudices play havoc among the peoples and bring about warfare and strife and it is impossible to remove them without a common medium.

I am an Oriental and on this account I am shut out from your thoughts and you likewise from mine. A mutual language will become the mightiest means toward universal progress, for it will cement the east and the west. It will make the world one home and become the divine impulse for human advancement. It will upraise the standard of oneness of the world of humanity and

make the earth a universal commonwealth. It will create love between the children of men and good fellowship between the various creeds.[pg 145]

Praise be to God, that Dr. Zamenhof has constructed the Esperanto language. It has all the potential qualities of universal adoption. All of us must be grateful and thankful to him for his noble effort, for in this matter he has served his fellow-man well. He has done a service which will bestow divine benefits on all peoples. With untiring effort and self-sacrifice on the part of its devotees it holds a promise of universal acceptance.

Therefore every one of us must study this language and make every effort to spread it, so that each day it may receive a wider recognition, be accepted by all nations and governments of the world and become a part of the curriculum of all the public schools. I hope that the business of the future international conferences and congresses will be carried on in Esperanto.

In the coming ages, two languages will be taught in the schools, one the native tongue, the other an international auxiliary language. Consider today how difficult is human communication. One may study fifty languages and travel through a country and still be at a loss. I myself speak several Oriental languages, but know no western tongue. Had this universal language pervaded the globe, I should have studied it and you would have been directly informed of my thoughts and I of yours and a special friendship would have been established between us.

Please send some teachers to Persia so that[pg 146] they may teach Esperanto to the younger generation. I have written asking some of them to come here to study it.

May it be promulgated rapidly; then the world of humanity will find eternal peace; all the nations will associate with one another like mothers and sisters, fathers and brothers, and each individual member of the community will be fully informed of the thoughts of all.

I am extremely grateful to you and thank you for these lofty efforts, for you have gathered at this banquet in a selfless endeavor to further this great end. Your hope is to render a mighty service

to the world of humanity and for this exalted aim I congratulate you from the depths of my heart.[pg 147]

