

WHITHER THE INTERNATIONAL AUXILIARY LANGUAGE?

Author: Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew

Published: *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.2 (1989): 1-11

The article explores both the world's intense urge for an international language (that "may be learned easily, naturally, and painlessly" [9]) and the challenge of choosing one. The author shares the pristine vision of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá regarding this inevitable step toward unity and peace. She provides a thorough presentation of the candidates, focussing primarily upon "The Case for Esperanto" and "The Case for English." Chew notes that because Esperanto is somewhat culture-bound and artificial, it "no longer draws as much universal optimism and acclaim as it did . . ." (6).

I believe that lovers of English will discover equal energy and enthusiasm for this "language of revelation," once we adopt a better bridge between our spoken and our written words. Chew also comments on the aspects of English that make it difficult to learn: "its arbitrary spelling and pronunciation that make even the native speaker sometimes cry out in frustration" (7).

The low efficiency rating of our traditional English alphabet can be remedied. According to John Culkin, director of the Center for Understanding Media in New York, the English alphabet is only twenty percent efficient. "Spoken English has 40 sounds, and written English spells them 200 ways." Today, the language is represented by a twenty-six letter set of alphabetic hieroglyphics that require three to five years to learn. With a forty-letter alphabet, only a few months of instruction and practice would be necessary.

The English alphabet that provides forty letters for forty sounds is called UNIFON. It was invented by a Chicago economist named John Malone in 1959 and provides a logical and consistent system compatible with all computers.

A	△	∧	B	⊘	D	E	∩	∩	F
AT	ATE	ALL	BOW	CHAIR	DIP	HEN	ME	HER	EAST
G	H	I	±	J	K	L	M	N	∩
GOAT	HAT	BIT	BITE	JAM	KISS	LOW	MUSIC	NO	KING
O	Q	Q	Q	Q	P	R	S	\$	T
LQT	QLD	LOOK	OUT	BOY	PIPE	RUN	CELL SAY	SURE	TABLE
h	h	U	U	U	V	W	Σ	Y	Z
THERE	THIRST	UP	DUE	YOU	VEST	WIG	AZURE	YES	ZEBRA

The use of UNIFON (English) as a pronouncing code or bridging guide is clearly an important ingredient on an international scale, whether or whenever we change the alphabet. And UNIFON's adaptability to other languages is one of its most attractive features. Recently, UNIFON was adapted to four of the Native American tongues along the California-Oregon border, providing those special tribes (the Tolowa, the Yurok, the Hupa, et al.) with a written language to help preserve their culture.

The first step [in the improvement of our world literacy situation] is to make UNIFON available as a pronouncing alphabet, to serve as a diacritical marking system in dictionaries, to replace the chop suey now appearing between the brackets in the dictionary. Most people never learn the current systems anyway, so there will not be a lot of popular resistance to the change. . . . Since there is a perfect coincidence between the letters of UNIFON and the sounds of English, we will be able to alphabetize all words both according to their traditional spellings and their UNIFON spellings. Thus, the ancient conundrum [of not being able to look up a word in the dictionary because of an inability to spell the word] will be solved. . . . [i]n our new two-way, transphonal dictionary. [For example,] the word "physics" will be listed and cross-referenced as:

physics-FIZIKS
and
FIZIKS-physics.

We "will be able to look up a word either according to its spelling or its pronunciation. This convertibility between pronunciation and spelling will open up a variety of new approaches in the learning and transmission of English and other languages" (John Culkin, "From A and Alef to Zed and Omega," *TWA Ambassador* [Oct. 1990]: 15-16).

SUSAN GILMAN