

BASIC ENGLISH AS A WORLD LANGUAGE?

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DURING BRITAIN'S blackest hour, her mightiest weapon was the eloquence of Winston Churchill. From his potential vocabulary of from 50,000 to 60,000 words the Prime Minister drove an invisible sword again and again at the heart of the enemy until his besieged countrymen could arm themselves with new weapons of steel.

Last week Winston Churchill unsheathed another, simpler weapon—for peace. Far more important now than the eloquence of any one man, he told an assembly which had gathered at Harvard University to see him receive an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, was an international language. A lasting peace and a more understanding world could come, he declared, from the universal adoption of Basic English, an 850-word highbrow pidgin which can be learned by a ninth-grade student in six months.

Report called for

The British Prime Minister's public praise was the biggest boost any international language had ever received. Already Churchill had persuaded the British Cabinet to set up a committee of Ministers to study Basic's success, its value, and the advisability of government-financing for its spread. Some of the things the report—to be made in three or four months—probably will reveal are that at the outbreak of war Basic was being taught in thirty countries; that Rockefeller Foundation and Payne Fund grants have permitted important research at Harvard by a distinguished Commission on English Language Studies; that some fifty books (including the New Testament in 1,000 words) have been translated into Basic; and that it is already being widely used by international organizations, in foreign trade, and in international radio.

Basic English was first "discovered" in 1920, when I. A. Richards (now at Harvard) and C. K. Ogden were writing "The Meaning of Meaning." Working at Magdalene College at Cambridge, they found that whenever they defined words they always came back to a few other words. Hence, they felt, "there might be some limited set of words in terms of which the meanings of all other words might be stated." On that basis they at least figuratively reduced the 600,000-word English language to 18 verbs, 78 pronouns, adverbs, and prepositions, 600 nouns, and 150 adjectives. At the same time, they pared the complicated grammar rules to seven—"the smallest number necessary for the clear statement of ideas."

Verbs and Nouns

The limitations of the Basic verbs—come, get, give, go, keep, let, make, put, seem, take, be, do, have, say, see, send, may, will—are overcome by combining with them the pronouns, adverbs, or prepositions. For example, Dr. Johnson's well-dressed verbs like abandon, abdicate, adjure, cede, desert, desist, yield, &c., all reduce to "give up." The nouns are divided into two groups: 400 of them, like account, education, mind, kiss, and wind are classified as "general," while the other 200—angle, bag, garden, pipe, skirt, ticket, worm, &c.—are "picturable." Likewise, there are 100 "general" adjectives: able, elastic, normal, young, &c., and 50 "opposites": dry, late, secret, white, and so forth.

One important grammatical change is the standardization of word order. For example, "I will put the record on the machine now" should read in only that way, with the subject first, the verb second and the predicate last. Beyond that, there are only seven rules to learn, such as that plurals are made by adding