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ENGLISH AND LITHUANIAN:
Two Candidates For The International Language*

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To discuss the possibility of an international language just a few decades ago would have been as futile as to present a new version of the *perpetuum mobile* or perhaps, even as tragic as the search for the well of eternal youth. Since time immemorial, however, man has wanted to communicate with all men on this planet. During most of the brilliant eras of history, there actually *was* (from the practical point of view) *one* principal language of communication, at least for the religious, military, administrative and intellectual elite. Chinese, Summerian, Assyrian, Old Egyptian, Persian, Old Indie (Sanskrit), Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Phoenician, Latin, Arabic, French — these and other languages at one time or another have served as international (or universal) languages in their respective worlds. These were, of course, natural languages. They all became, at least temporarily, international or universal means of communication by what we usually call "the natural events of history." Of all the languages mentioned above, only Latin and French are still considered by some people as being international languages of sorts in the world today: Latin, primarily in the Roman Catholic Church and to some extent in medicine and jurisprudence and in other strict sciences; French, in diplomacy in some limited areas of the world.

In addition to natural languages, people have been trying for some time to invent artificial languages for the purpose of becoming the international language. Comenius and Descartes were among the first men to advocate the idea of creating an artificial language for this noble purpose, but, curiously enough, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that serious attempts were made in this direction. Thus, in 1880 the artificial language *Volapük* was invented by a German priest, and by around 1890, some 200,000 adherents were trying to learn and use this language. Because of its complexity and difficulty, practically no one uses it today.

In 1887 Dr. Zamenhof came up with the idea of *Esperanto,* which is based on the several main languages of Europe: Spanish, Italian, Latin, French, German, and English. In this language, all the words and forms are "regular," and there are very few endings. For all practical purposes, it usually resembles some mixture of Romance languages, e.g., *Mi devas skribi kelkajn leterojn,* is translated in English as "I must write a few letters" or *Metu vian čapelon sur la tablon,* "Put your hat on the table."

Esperanto had a limited success and was used more in Asia and Europe than in the Western Hemisphere. It is actually still slowly expanding today. More than thirty periodical publications appear in various countries in Esperanto, quite a few literary works have been translated into it, and Esperantists hold international congresses. The language is especially useful for such groups as stamp collectors.

All told, about fifty-three artificial languages have been proposed since 1880, but all of them, so far, have failed in their basic ambition to become the International Language. Why should this be? First, as soon as an artificial language is created, it joins the ranks of the

dead languages. No matter how easy *is* its grammar, nor how regular are all its grammatical forms, it is a lifeless creation without a natural, physical, psychological or cultural background. All natural languages develop, change, and adapt themselves to changing cultural patterns and demands. They live only in the individual idiolects of their speakers, which no artificial languages can ever hope to achieve at a practical level. Second, artificial languages may temporarily serve to bridge the gap in some narrow and very specialized field (*e.g.* philatelic correspondence as mentioned above), but they will never be able to serve as a tool of total and universal communication. Third, in turning to oral use, each speaker of an artificial language, no matter how carefully he learns and tries to apply even the most rigid rules of pronunciation, will invariably be influenced by the phonological system of his own native language, including its prosodic or suprasegmental

features. Thus, the degree of aural comprehension between two speakers of an artificial language may be very low. The following conclusion may be inevitably reached: no artificial language of the sort yet devised has the chance to become a truly international language. Since we are definitely inclined to think that no artificial language is likely to become a general international language, then we may want to turn to the natural languages to pick possible candidates for this exalted post. Before proceeding, however, let me state three convictions, without going into deeper and more detailed explanations.

1. I cannot foresee any possibility whatsoever that any of the future international languages could ever completely displace the multitude of the world's languages. The international language, if ever achieved and generally accepted, will always remain *the second language of cross cultural communication.* Thus, it is better to call it the international language, not a universal language.

2. If and when an international language arises, it does not mean that the same language will remain forever in that role. For various reasons, it may be replaced.

3. Although it may help a bit, the general acceptance of an international language will not bring about general world peace. It may alleviate some "rough edges," but language, being a social phenomenon, by itself cannot bring about a guarantee of a lasting world peace.

Let us leave the past and look at the situation today. Several languages may be unofficially vying for this "position." First, there are the five official languages of the United Nations: Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. To this list we may add a few more, for instance, let us say, Arabic, German, Hindi, Swahili, and perhaps Lithuanian? We can certainly add Lithuanian because no one has closed the nominations and because once in a while Lithuanian has been mentioned for this purpose, since without any doubt it is the most archaic among all the Indo-European languages spoken today, and as a result it is very useful, indeed indispensable in the study of Indo-European linguistics.

Having admitted both English and Lithuanian to the candidacy of an international language, we shall proceed to analyze the relative likelihood of their adoption. In practical terms, we may have here two extreme candidates. The discussion, we hope, will illustrate the calculation of the "possibilities and chances" of any language candidate nominated for the position of an international language.

We shall apply ten criteria, although this number is chosen more or less at random.

1. The present number of native and natural speakers.
2. The extent of the teaching of the language.
3. The number of non-native speakers able to use the language.
4. The composition or the origin of the vocabulary.
5. The geographical location of the language.
6. The simplicity or the adaptability of the grammatical structure.
7. The adaptability of the language to new words and new formations, acceptance of new loanwords.
8. The beauty of the language.
9. The antiquity of the language.
10. The writing system and spelling problems in the language.

1. Speakers. The present number of speakers of Lithuanian does not include more than four million, including all the Lithuanians living abroad. English, on the other hand, has about 300 million speakers. Thus, clearly mark a *plus* for English.

2. Instruction. Very few students indeed study Lithuanian, primarily a few graduate students who want to get better acquainted with the Lithuanian language for their deeper studies of Indo-European linguistics, for which Lithuanian is indispensable. This type of instruction is offered at several universities in Europe and in the United States. At the same time, the teaching of English, especially in secondary schools, is in a period of great increase: most European countries offer several years of English in their secondary schools and so do quite a few countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. From the practical point of view, another *plus* for English.

3. Non-Native speakers. This is very difficult to estimate, but one thing is clear initially; perhaps a few dozen non-Lithuanians can use Lithuanian, while there must be several million, even tens of millions of non-English speakers who by now can use English with various degrees of success. Another practical plus for English.

4. Vocabulary. Nobody can estimate exactly the various "sources" of the lexical treasures of a language, but a certain approximation possibly can be achieved. It is generally estimated that more than one-half of the Lithuanian vocabulary has been inherited directly from its Proto-Indo-European source. About one eighth comes from the Proto-Baltic era (circa 2,000 B.C. to 500 B.C.) and about one eighth was formed in the "Lithuanian era" (Eastern Proto-Baltic, circa 500 B.C. to 700 A.D.; Old Lithuanian, circa 700 A.D. to 1600 A.D.; Modern Lithuanian — since circa 1600). This means that only one fourth of the total Lithuanian vocabulary has been borrowed at various times from other Indo-European languages, primarily from Germanic and Slavic languages, but also from Latin, Greek, Italian, French and others.

English, on the other hand, although by history and its basic structure a Germanic (Teutonic) language, has drawn heavily upon the Romance languages, primarily Latin, and later French, for its vocabulary. Thus, it is estimated that English now contains more than fifty percent of Romance type vocabulary; English also has some tiny residues of Celtic and later borrowings from other Germanic languages such as Scandinavian languages, Dutch, and German. Quite a few words came into English from Greek, usually through Latin. After English became a colonial language in many parts of the globe, it adapted and accepted words from many sources, from the American Indian languages, from the languages of India, from Arabic, from various African languages, and even from Australian aboriginal languages (*e.g.* boomerang, to moomerang).

From the point of view of the ease of learning the vocabulary, we must again concede a *plus* for English.

5. Geographical location. Lithuanian has been spoken on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea for at least the last 4,000 years. It is true that the Baltic speech area some 3,000 or 4,000 years ago was much larger; it stretched all the way from the Vistula river in the South to the area south of Moscow to the east, and it reached in the North approximately the area of the Latvian-Estonian border, having the Baltic Sea on the west. However, it was still basically the same climate zone, possessing the same type of fauna and flora and more or less the same landscape. All of this, of course, is partially reflected in the language itself.

English, on the other hand, spread through several continents, through the most varied of landscapes with their varied fauna and flora, their varied and multicolored physical features, and acquired something of their reflections in the form of English itself. Thus, for example, English will be able to provide much better the locally colored vocabulary and idiomatic expressions for the finer points in describing the type of fishing the Canadian Eskimos do, or the customs and ways of the South African peoples, or the bush-philosophy of the aborigines in Australia, or the various cultures of the subcontinent of India.

From this point of view we cannot help but grant another *plus* for English.

6. Simplicity. English as it is commonly known is not highly inflected. For most nouns, it is sufficient to add an s in the plural, adjectives have no remaining inflection whatsoever, and the verbal inflection is fairly simple. In the case of the regular verbs, learning to add three endings will suffice, *e.g. work, work-s, work-ed, work-ing.*

It is a completely different matter in Lithuanian, which has five declensions of nouns and three of adjectives, while each verb has a multitude of tenses, each with different personal endings. Let me illustrate this with a few examples. If Lithuanian became the international language, any person who would like to say *a house, the houses, houses,* would have to learn the following:

	Singular	**Plural**
Nom.	namas	namai
Gen.	namo	namų
Dat.	namui	namams
Acc.	namų	namus
Instr.	namu	namais
Loc.	name	namuose
Voc.	name	namai

Thus, for singular alone, one would have to learn this series of endings: -as -o, -ui, -a, -u, -e, -e. And, as if that were not enough, Lithuanian has the so-called movable accent. That is, the same word in the nominative case may be stressed on one syllable, while in another case the stress may fall on a different syllable. That is how one distinguishes between *name* (Locative) "in the house" with the stress on the last syllable, and *name* (Vocative), with the stress on the first syllable. Although there is some similarity between the so-called declensions, for practical purposes, a learner would have to know five different types of ending sets!

The situation is no simpler in the verbal system. Let us take just a brief glance:

Present tense	**Past tense**
aš dirbu "I work," etc.	aš dirbau "worked," etc.
tu dirbi	tu dirbai
jis dirba	jis dirbo
mes dirbame	mes dirbome
jūs dirbate	jūs dirbote
jie dirba	jie dirbo

There are several more of the so-called single tenses, several compound tenses, and a full system of tenses in the passive voice, plus several participles. In Lithuanian, all adjectives are also highly inflected as well as almost all numerals, pronouns, and even most of the participles.[1]

Without proceeding further, let us mark a large *plus* for English.

7. Adaptability. Since English does not have much of an inflection system left, it can very easily adapt new words into its system. Theoretically, it can "convert" any given word into that function which is needed. That is why the Greek word *telephone* can function as a noun, verb or adjective, *viz.: This is the red telephone, I want to telephone him,,* and *The telephone conversations are very useful.* In other words, *telephone* need not be first changed to fit into a certain declensional or conjugational pattern. In Lithuanian, the noun is *telefonas,* a masculine noun which belongs to the same declension as *namas* (see above). It will have all the endings just like *namas.* The verb will be *telefonuoti,* with various endings added to agree with the person, number, voice, and mood. And, finally, the adjective will be *telefoninis,* with just as many endings as the *namas* above.

Since the future international language will constantly have to adopt and adapt various new words, English is here, too, clearly the winner. Mark a *plus.*

8. Beauty. Since nobody has yet come up with any acceptable measure for the beauty of languages, and since any comparison in this question is always deeply subjective, permit me to declare here a sentimental tie.

9. Antiquity. The preservation of very old and archaic features is very useful for the study of the history and development of related languages. Modern English has changed so much from its Proto-Indo-European background that it does not supply very much evidence for historical and comparative linguistics. Lithuanian, on the other hand, is indispensable in the study of Indo-European linguistics. It is perfectly true that the Lithuanian of 1969 still displays some features in its phonology, morphology, and word-formation, which represent a more archaic layer than the anciently recorded Old Greek, Latin, or Old Indie (Sanskrit). No doubt "we have at last a *plus* for (Lithuanian, though admittedly one to be applauded by a singularly limited population.

10. Spelling. No language in this world has a truly phonetic spelling, as it is usually called. That is, no language has an invariant correspondence of one letter for one sound. However, there is no doubt whatsoever that the antiquarian spelling practices of modern Eng-lish are horribly difficult. We write *through* but pronounce it /thru:/. Thus to signify three sounds we employ seven letters. In the same vein a number of letters in the English alphabet can represent several different sounds (phonemes), not to mention their positional variants.

In Lithuanian, the situation is much more realistic. Lithuanians spell the word for "house," *namas* and pronounce it /na:mas/. They spell the word "language," *kalba* and pronounce it /kalba/, and so on.. Even if a moderate and practical spelling reform is adopted for English — for example, *night* is spelled *nite* and *through* is spelled *thru* — English spelling will in all probability still remain rather atrocious.

In the area of spelling, we clearly have a *plus2* for Lithuanian.

We could think of some other areas for comparison, but I believe ten areas are enough for a temporary judgement. Our score is thus one *tie,* seven *plusses* for English, and two *plusses* for Lithuanian.

A simple conclusion may be reached: English definitely has a greater possibility of becoming the international language. But few Lithuanians will ever accept that conclusion!

1. The fullest description of the Lithuanian grammar can be found in Dambriūnas, Leonardas, Antanas Klimas and William R. Schmalstieg, Introduction to Modern Lithuanian, Franciscan Fathers Press, Brooklyn, N. Y., 1966, 480 pages. Cf. especially pp. 327-389 (Grammatical Appendix). For a short glimpse at the Lithuanian noun, cf. Klimas, Antanas, "Lithuanian Language: The Noun," Lituanus (A Lithuanian quarterly in English), September, I960, 123-126.
2. Cf. several articles by Klimas, Antanas: "Lithuanian and Indo-European," Lituanus, December, 1957, 14-16; "Lithuanian and the Germanic Languages," Lituanus, June, 1958, 41-46; "Lithuanian and Latin," Lituanus, September, 1958, 73-74; "Lithuanian and the Slavic Languages," Lituanus, March, 1959, 10-12; "Lithuanian and Sanskrit," Lituanus, September, 1959, 78-79; "Balto-Slavic, or Baltic and Slavic? The Relationship of Baltic and Slavic Languages," Lituanus, June, 1967, 5-37.