Letters

International Language

Some inadequate and inaccurate information concerning Esperanto and Interlingua seems to have come to Mario Pei for inclusion in his book *One Language for the World and How to Achieve It.* Alexander Gode's review of the book in *Science* [**128**, 194 (1958)] adds a little more.

Pei gives considerable and generally favorable attention to Esperanto, but he is content with 1952 figures about it. He cites the absurd charge that early Esperanto congresses "frequently broke up in confusion, with schismatic movements arising from them," and remarks that "the difference between Esperanto and its many schismatic descendants may be described as trifling, but it is useless to deny that they weaken the movement for an international language by dispersing the energies of the interlinguists" (p. 164). He seems to hold Esperanto itself responsible for its would-be reformers and competitors.

This is not altogether fair. If the body of Esperantists had compromised with the individuals or groups seeking to modify the language and had accepted their changes, however "trifling," or had heeded the advice of bystanders that they "get together" with the advocates of unlike systems, Esperanto would have become as fluid as some of its competitors and would soon have perished. Its "lack of stability" would then have become an argument for proving any constructed language chimerical and futile. The Congress of International Associations, which in 1920 endorsed Esperanto as a world auxiliary language, had the wisdom to recommend that any improvement in it be deferred until it be adopted by the governments (p. 213). Of course the emergence of new linguistic systems weakened the Esperanto movement and lessened the impact of its actual demonstration of the practicability of the auxiliary language idea. The same thing is happening today, in the attempt to promote the inferior rival system Interlingua.

Apparently, Pei is quite interested in Interlingua, the only interlanguage produced by persons hired to do so. Its history, as he has it, is like a fairy tale: "Almost twenty years ago, a group of linguists, heavily financed by a very wealthy lady, undertook to construct an international language on a truly 'scientific' basis" (p. 171). The facts behind the fairy tale are as follows: Mrs. Alice Vanderbilt Morris became interested in Esperanto as a possible addition to her philanthropies. But the idea of forming an organization to sponsor impartial examination of the whole subject of interlanguage was presented to her at this time. Dropping the thought of Esperanto, Mrs. Morris (aided by her husband, Dave Hennen Morris) organized an International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA), which was incorporated in 1924 with an impressive board of directors. Its "Outline of Program" stated that its function was "merely to serve as a neutral clearing-house for study and information," with "no intention of developing or promoting any new language."

After about a decade, the IALA stopped sponsoring impartial research and undertook the creation of a language. It assembled a staff, three directors of research being successively employed, with some overlapping in different capacities at one time or another, some delay and part-time employment, especially in the war years, and some time out for preparation of a series of foreign-language textbooks. The first director was E. Clark Stillman, who left in 1942. The second was André Martinet, from 1946 to 1948. The third was Alexander Gode, already on the staff, who "assumed full direction of the work" in 1948 and was responsible for it thereafter (Interlingua dictionary, Storm Publishers, New York, 1951, pp. xiii–xiv).

The statement Pei imputes to Gode, describing Interlingua as "the product of the world's greatest linguistic minds over a period of nearly thirty years" (p. 238), must refer to these three men (Stillman, Martinet, Gode); and the "period of nearly thirty years" must mean the IALA's life span (1924–1953), regardless of the fact that during the first decade thereof the IALA was not producing a language and sponsored very few projects or studies having any bearing on language creation. The statement in the IALA circular *Practical World Language* that "work on the dictionary was begun at the University of Liverpool under Professor William E. Collinson," and the further inaccurate implication to the same effect in the foreword to the Interlingua dictionary (p. xiii) surprised a number of persons, including Collinson himself, an active supporter of Esperanto, whose commission executed for the IALA may have been the last it offered any scholar during its impartial research period.

The "scientific basis" claimed for Interlingua, as in the sentence quoted at the beginning of the foregoing paragraph, seems exaggerated. Fewer source languages than are represented in Esperanto were used in the compilation of Interlingua's vocabulary (actually only Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English—its Romance element only). The Interlingua dictionary mentions adoption of "principles," such as that words considered for acceptance must

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have representation in at least three of those languages; but evidently the principles were relaxed on occasion, and they were ignored for two kinds of words accepted. One consists of numerous "unassimilated guest words, that is, foreign or borrowed words" (Interlingua grammar, Storm Publishers, New York, 1951, section 9). The other consists of "a very liberal supply of grammatical words" (section 134), namely, "all such forms" found in "several older auxiliary-language systems" (Interlingua dictionary, p. xlix). These systems were doubtless those whose authors had "placed their manuscripts at the disposal of IALA" (Interlingua dictionary, p. xv). Very little is said about Interlingua's grammar, which is mainly that of French without gender and with its individual peculiarities claimed to be removed, with further minor "streamlining" favoring Italian and Spanish—but with irregularities and uncertainties of its own.

The most vital defect of Interlingua is that it cannot be spoken. This is admitted indirectly in the frequent assertion that it can be read with the greatest of ease. In 1951 the above-mentioned IALA circular conceded that "In the early stages of the new language most of its use is likely to be written." The following circuitous words, six years later, seem to admit clearly that its use still has been only written: "For the first time in human history, an international language has been fashioned that can be read at sight by all who can read any Western European language. . . . it [Interlingua] can be considered a sort of basic, average language (primarily for reading), common to most of the reading world. . . . Interlingua can be read without study or preparation by German, French, Italian, Anglo-Saxon, and South American people, as well as by Japanese, Russian, and other people who have been exposed to occidental linguistic patterns" ("Babel resolved," *Science* **126**, 55 [1957], editorial by Watson Davis, editor of *Science News Letter*, to whose staff the IALA transferred Gode when it disbanded in 1953). There has not yet been demonstration, report, or claim that anyone can speak Interlingua.

The further unsupported claims quoted in Pei's book that Interlingua is particularly suitable for scientific and technical writing (for which Esperanto is already widely used, in both books and periodicals, including one journal entirely in Esperanto), and also that it is "the" language of scientific congresses because anyone who is "scientifically trained" can read it "with ease" (p. 238), and even that it "is meant primarily for written use at scientific congresses" (p. 171). It impugns the good sense of scientists to propose that they use at congresses a language for reading only, as in

programs, digests of headphone translations, and "compilation of papers which may be read silently and at leisure" (p. 44). A main purpose of assembly is oral communication and discussion. For such use, Esperanto has proved completely adequate in both its own annual international congresses and in technical and scientific ones.

IVY KELLERMAN REED
315 Westbourne Street,
La Jolla, California

My review of Pei's book did not discuss the comparative merits of Interlingua and Esperanto, for the simple reason that this problem has no bearing on Pei's primary objective. Pei presented a program of "how to achieve one language for the world," leading up to it by (i) a survey of the "linguistic state of the world" and (ii) a summary of past and present interlingual or supralingual events and endeavors. I expressed my doubts regarding the practicability of Pei's program and my unqualified admiration for his preparatory outlines. I supplied no information, inaccurate or accurate, on either Esperanto or Interlingua, but simply reported my impression that of all the available auxiliary-language projects of the "planned or guided" variety, Pei seems to take seriously only Esperanto and Interlingua. This is still my impression; and it is still my impression that "Esperanto emerges," in Pei's book, "as a dream which the faithful believe will come true," while "Interlingua appears as a tool effective today in the specialized applications for which it was designed."

It is obvious that in handling a maze of data of the kind that went into Pei's book, no one—not even a master of organization of Pei's caliber—can avoid every last error of fact or interpretation. I hold that such matters may be given room in a concise review only if they are characteristic of the work reviewed or if they seriously impair its usefulness. Otherwise, I believe, minor inaccuracies had better be drawn to the author's attention privately, for correction in a possible later edition. A point of this kind is Pei's remark (p. 164) that schismatic movements often caused Esperanto congresses to break up in confusion. It has been suggested to Pei that it might be wise to rephrase this passage to avoid all implications of a causal link between congresses and schisms.

I have, on the whole, no comment on Reed's outline of the history of Interlingua. Its peculiar tenor results from Reed's mistaken notion that Interlingua is a "rival system" of Esperanto. It isn't. Esperanto was designed as an autonomous medium, enabling those who have studied it to communicate with one another. To increase its effectiveness, the numbers of its adepts must be increased.

This results in a proselytizing effort which is distasteful to many and looks hopeless to many more. Interlingua attempts to speak in such a way that the most diverse forms of "linguistic sophistication"—as imparted by the most diverse educational systems now in operation—supply an adequate basis for its comprehension. It functions without requiring that its beneficiaries have studied it or can speak and write it.

Reed quotes, disapprovingly, Pei's "quotation" that Interlingua is "the product of the world's greatest linguistic minds over a period of nearly thirty years." She does not claim that I made that statement. She merely says that Pei "imputes" it to me, and goes on to interpret that whoever made it must have meant to refer to Stillman, Martinet, and Gode. Something is a little off here. Actually, no one was referred to, and no one made that statement. Pei dramatized his idea that a world congress should adopt a universal language, outlining in some detail how such a congress might work. For this purpose, he invented some partisan speeches which are amusing to read because they reflect the fun their author had concocting them. It is in one of these that Pei has the spokesman for Interlingua (under my name) claim flamboyantly the endorsement of the world's greatest linguistic minds. There is also some soapbox oratory in support of Esperanto. It never occurred to me, nor, I am sure, to Pei, that anyone could ever try to base a serious argument on these delightful bits of tongue-in-cheek fiction.

ALEXANDER GODE
Science Service, New York

Acknowledgments in Scientific Papers

It seems worth while to bring up a few of the ethical problems which arise in the widely followed practice of making acknowledgments to various persons in scientific papers.

There can, of course, be no quarrel with the specific mention of the source of a culture, of a specimen of known compound, of an intermediate for a synthesis, or of specific analytical data on these preparations, cultures, and so on. Such acknowledgments are essential to the ability of the reader to evaluate the paper, or seek an equivalent starting material, or attempt to repeat and extend the work.

The problem arises chiefly with respect to the general type of acknowledgment of the style, "The authors wish to thank Professor ———, Dr. ———, and Professor ——— for their helpful criticisms, interesting comments, fruitful discussions . . ." and the like.