

**ABRIDGED  
GRAMMAR  
OF VOLAPÜK**

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Abridged Grammar of Volapük by Karl Dornbusch

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**KARL DORNBUSCH**

**ABRIDGED  
GRAMMAR  
OF VOLAPÜK**



International Commercial Language.

ABRIDGED GRAMMAR

OR

# VOLAPÜK

BY

Prof. KERCKHOFFS.

ADAPTED TO THE USE OF ENGLISH SPEAKING PEOPLE

BY

KARL DORNBUSCH,

*Teacher of Modern Languages.*



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## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.\*)

The creation of a universal language for international intercourse has been the subject of much controversy since the 17th century. While philosophers have by turns extolled it as a bond of union and concord, and a powerful lever to civilization, literary men generally appear to agree in denying its utility; and in our own days many linguists question the possibility of composing an artificial language of real and practical value.

The idea has however, within the last few years, gained much ground, in France and Germany: practical minds remark with justice, that we are in a century wherein new wants spring up every day, and in which the impossibilities of one day become the marvellous realities of the next. Besides, nobody thinks any longer of bringing into use or creating a language which should become one day, like Greek in antiquity, or Latin in the middle ages, a universal organ of science and literature: that is a dream long since abandoned. The question is still less to supersede any of our modern languages in the intercourse of nations.

But, in the same manner as diplomatists have a universal or common language for their international dealings, scholars, travellers and merchants would also find a great advantage in possessing a simple and practical means of communication,

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\*) Extract from the "Leçon d'ouverture" of the Volapuek course held by M. Kerckhoffs at the "Ecole des Hautes Etudes commerciales de Paris."

not only with the different peoples of Europe, but with all the civilized nations of the world.

Every one knows that commercial intercourse with foreigners is entered upon with all the more ease and security as agreements can, by means of a language known to both contracting parties, be established in a clearer and more precise manner. People however are liable to overlook the fact that among the eight hundred and odd languages, which are at the present day spoken it would be necessary to know at least forty or fifty in order to be able to hold communication with the principal civilized nations with whom during the last half century, railways and steamboats have brought us into constant communication.

Now, if it is not very difficult to learn in a few years three or four Romanic or Germanic languages, a much longer time is necessary to master a single Hindoostanee or Semitic dialect. The difficulties become even insurmountable for many persons, when an agglutinative language is contemplated, such as Turkish or Japanese, or a monosyllabic idiom like Chinese or Annamese; and, still the people who speak Chinese dialects, or have adopted Chinese writing, constitute alone one third of the total population of the world.

The nations of the East are still more embarrassed, when they wish to enter into commercial intercourse with Europe. Devoid of geographical knowledge, imperfectly informed by their political chiefs, they are generally obliged to have recourse to the intermediation of colonists or resident foreigners, and thus become the victims of the intrigues occasioned by political and religious hatred.

Let a universal language become adopted and the situation is completely changed; the same traveller can visit the most widely different countries, the same commercial journal can be read and understood in all the centres of production and consumption, and the prices of a London or Paris house will be commented upon by the merchants of Pekin, Yeddo, Madras, as well as by those of Alexandria, Constantinople and Moscow!

Navigators would find advantages equally great in being able to communicate easily with one another, either at sea or in the large stations of the Ocean. Maritime nations have, it is true, already adopted a kind of a universal language, by means of which mariners of all nations can understand each other, but it is a semaphoric language, used for communications on the main sea or at a distance and which cannot be adapted to the exigencies of conversation or correspondence.

It is needless to enumerate the immense services which the existence of a universal language would render to science and industry. Not only do the most precious discoveries often remain unknown for years, because they have been explained in an idiom little known, but entire nations remain deprived of the benefits of civilization from the simple fact that their ignorance of European languages prevents the organs of progress and science from reaching them.

It might be asked if, rather than have recourse to an artificial language, it would not be preferable to adopt one of the existing European idioms, for instance, English, German, Spanish or French. English is already the maternal language of 100 millions of individuals, German of 56, French and Spanish are each spoken by nearly 43 millions.

To this scheme are opposed two motives equally powerful; national rivalry, and the difficulties of all kinds that the study of these languages presents; difficulties of pronunciation, spelling, and grammar. If two or three years are necessary for a Frenchman to learn German how long would a Turk, a Japanese or a Chinese require to learn English, German or French, when confined to the resources offered by his native country for the study of those languages?

The verbs alone in German as well as in French will present to him obstacles almost insurmountable. As General Faidherbe lately said in a study on the programme of the French alliance the complications of the verbs often hinder colonial populations from learning a European idiom.

The first attempt in favour of the creation of a universal language can be traced to the 17th century. Some have



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looked for the solution of the problem in the invention of an artificial language, divested of all the difficulties which characterize our natural languages; others, and they are the greater number, have only sought a means of communication by written signs and imagined an ideographic system, in which the words, that in the various languages express the same idea are represented by the same sign, similar to that practised in our system of numeration, and in our algebraical and geometrical signs.

It would take long to enumerate all the works that have been published on this interesting subject. It is sufficient for me to cite the names of Descartes, Leibnitz, Becker, Wilkins in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; those of Kalmar, Berger, de Cornel, Vater, de Marnieux, Bulet, Chambry and of the abbé Sicard in the 18<sup>th</sup>, those of Nasher, Schmied, Niethammer, Stein in the commencement of this century, and lastly, at an epoch nearer to our own, the names of Sinihaldo de Mas, Para, Paic, de Gablenz, Bachmaier, Pizo, Sudre, Ochando, Holmar, Caumont, Letellier and Maldant.

Treasures of science and patience have been spent in the study of this question, and yet it would be difficult to quote, amongst the forty or fifty universal languages, invented in the course of the last two centuries, a single one having any practical value whatever: they were either pasigraphic systems, meant to be read only, or languages accessible only to the highest intellects, or simply some existing language more or less ingeniously mutilated!

A german polyglot, Mr. Schleyer of Constance, a man of letters as well as a distinguished linguist, has at last succeeded, after 20 years' laborious effort, in solving the difficult problem.

He has named his system Volapük, from pük, language, and vol, universe, literally *Universal language*.

By borrowing certain characteristic features from the different idioms of Europe, M. Schleyer has been able to combine a logical, well arranged and extremely simple system.

The difficulties of pronunciation, which characterize

English, French and most of the Slavic languages are done away with in Volapük by the simple fact that each letter, either a vowel or consonant, has but one and the same sound. The difficulties in spelling also are by the same means cleared away, words being always written as they are pronounced and, vice versa, being invariably pronounced as they are written. Moreover, any combination of letters, difficult to conceive or pronounce, has been carefully avoided; it is the same with long compound words, peculiar to certain Germanic languages.

M. Schleyer has solved satisfactorily the problem of accentuation by adopting the principle of the French pronunciation, and always putting the accent on the last syllable. He has borrowed from the French their construction, which is one of the simplest and clearest of all European languages.

The simplicity of the grammar is not less remarkable: no artificial genders, a single conjugation, and no irregular verbs.

The roots of the words in Volapük have been borrowed from all the languages of Europe, but principally from the Romanic and Germanic languages; among the latter English has been particularly put under contribution.

As in Volapük the method of derivation is always the same, as the adjective, verb and adverb, are regularly formed from the substantive and have invariably the same termination, it suffices, we may say, to learn the nouns of the language to know all the words in the dictionary. It is true that the same principle of derivation prevailed in the formation of all our Arian languages; but the thousand influences which in the course of centuries, have from time to time affected their development, have done away with all unity, and the uniformity which characterises Volapük is found as little in our old tongues as in their modern derivatives.

To conclude, I believe there is no exaggeration in affirming that Volapük may be learned in the space of one month, by any person already knowing a Romanic language such as

French or Italian or a Germanic one, as English or German. One will, at least, be able at the end of that time, not only to understand the new language, but to translate correctly and without difficulty a letter from one's maternal language into Volapük.\*)

Some think that it will never be possible to arrive at a uniform pronunciation of Volapük, and fear that direct communication among individuals of different nationalities will on that account be rendered impossible.

In answer to such objections I will call attention to the fact that uniformity of pronunciation does not exist in any language, as little for the natives as for foreigners: the French of Lille pronounce quite differently from those of Bordeaux, and the German of Munich sounds nearly like a strange dialect to the ears of a native of Hamburg. But these differences do not by any means hinder Frenchmen and Germans from perfectly understanding one another. It will be the same with the pronunciation of three or four letters of the universal language, and particularly of the vowels *ē, ō, ŭ*.

Not that Mr. Schleyer's work is perfect; perfection is a stranger to this world. Besides a few mistakes, which will be found in the derivation of words, some rules of his grammar might be more precisely laid down, others must be modified. Thus he seems to have been wrong, while adopting the principle of the French construction, in allowing a certain latitude in the order of the different members of the sentence. Is it not affording an open field for individual caprices and for idioms, that are, in a manner the caprices of the multitude? Those who have studied Latin are well aware of the

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\*) The proof of this has been shown at the Commercial High School of Paris where a course of Volapük has been organized for the pupils of the Second Division. This course lasted two months, with one lesson a week; and, though the auditors could not make any written preparation on account of their numerous obligatory studies, they were, after 8 lessons, in a position to correspond without any difficulty with the Volapükists of the other countries of Europe.