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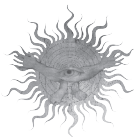
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Ogden's Basic English and its roots in the Early Modern English search for language simplicity¹

The idea of English as a lingua franca was anticipated in the early 1920s by Charles Kay Ogden, who conceived his Basic English as a form of controlled language that could be widely understood and used with proficiency by both native and non-native speakers. Basic English arguably represents a crucial moment in the development of the ideas of language simplicity and it remains a milestone which has influenced later controlled versions of English (e.g. Simplified Technical English, Special English, Simple English Wikipedia). In Ogden's codification of simplified language (which was deeply influenced by his previous semiotic studies) a few simplification criteria can be distinguished: controlled vocabulary, lexical isomorphism, standardisation (intended as establishing a discrete number of shared rules for the use of language), morphosyntax as an outgrowth of lexicon, the superiority of analytic structures over synthetic structures, and universality of a shared language as a key factor in the resolution of human conflicts. Language simplicity is therefore essential for better communication and improved social interactions. This essay argues that Ogden's idea of language simplicity is deeply rooted in the history of the English language and can be tracked back to the Reformation period, in which "plain speech" was seen as a source of truth and virtue as opposed to the ambiguity of a language rich in figures of speech and rhetorical artifice, and to the 17th century, in which we can distinguish a supposedly scientific approach in language simplification.

Nei primi anni Venti Charles Kay Ogden intuì che l'inglese poteva ricoprire il ruolo di lingua franca e concepì Basic English come una lingua controllata che potesse essere compresa su larga scala e impiegata con competenza da parlanti madrelingua e non. Si può affermare che il Basic di Ogden rappresenti un momento chiave nello sviluppo delle idee di semplicità linguistica; esso rimane una pietra miliare cui si sono ispirate versioni recensori di inglese controllato (ad esempio Simplified Technical English, Special English, Simple English Wikipedia). Nell'idea di semplificazione linguistica di Ogden (che era stata ampiamente influenzata dai suoi studi in campo semiotico) si possono distinguere alcuni principi essenziali: lessico controllato,

¹ Both authors are responsible for the overall planning and research for this paper. In particular, Daniel Russo is responsible for sections 1 and 2 while Angela Andreani for section 3 and subsections. Section 4 was written jointly by the two authors.

isomorfismo lessicale, standardizzazione (intesa come codifica di un numero preciso di regole condivise nell'uso della lingua), morfosintassi come prodotto del lessico, superiorità di strutture analitiche rispetto a quelle sintetiche e universalità di una lingua comune come fattore chiave nella risoluzione dei conflitti umani. La semplicità della lingua è pertanto ritenuta funzionale al miglioramento della comunicazione e delle interazioni sociali. In questo studio sosteniamo che l'idea di semplicità linguistica di Ogden affonda le radici nella storia della lingua inglese, radici che possono essere rintracciate nel XVI secolo, epoca in cui al "parlar chiaro" (plain speech) erano ricondotti valori di verità e virtù in contrapposizione alle ambiguità di un linguaggio figurato ricco di artifici retorici, e nel XVII secolo, quando emerse l'applicazione di criteri di scientificità all'ambito della semplificazione linguistica.

1. Introduction

Amongst the plethora of international constructed languages created since the 19th century – e.g. Volapük, (Schleyer 1882 [1880]), Esperanto (Zamenhof 1889 [1887]; 1905); Latino sine flexione (Peano 1903), Novial (Jespersen 1928), Sona (Searight 1935), Interlingua (Gode and Blair 1951), Frater (Phạm 1957), Neo (Alfandari 1961) – Charles Kay Ogden's Basic English is based upon a peculiar approach which sets it apart from other contemporary projects aiming at establishing a simple and comprehensive language for the purposes of international communication. Unlike Esperanto, which is arguably the most successful constructed auxiliary language (at least in terms of its general popularity), Basic English has a relatively short history; nevertheless, at the peak of its prominence in the 1930s and 1940s, its success was inextricably intertwined with the spread of the English language worldwide, to such an extent that Basic English would eventually transition from a proposed lingua franca *per se* to teaching material for the beginner to elementary levels of (standard) English as a lingua franca². Short-lived as it may have been, Basic found many advocates in Britain and the US; in particular, two influential statesmen of the time initially promoted its use and

² Cf. the introduction of Ogden (1930: 3) where Basic is presented as an international auxiliary language and "more than a mere educational experiment" and the introduction of Ogden (1934: 4) where Basic has an explicit two-fold purpose: "to serve as an international auxiliary language" and "to provide a rational introduction to normal English". Furthermore, the educational aspect is also prevalent in the works of Richards (1935) and Myers (1938), who were active in spreading Basic as a teaching method respectively in China and India.

divulgaration: these are none other than British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt (McArthur et al. 2018 [1997]).

One feature seems to be shared by all international constructed languages in the 19th and 20th centuries: they all claim to be ‘simple’ and ‘easy’ to learn, but the actual practical implications of this simplicity vary considerably across the auxiliary language projects of the time. For these reasons, this argumentative essay will discuss the role of Ogden’s Basic English in the history of the English language by concentrating on the following aspects: in Section 2 Ogden’s approach is introduced in relation to the notion of “linguistic simplicity” to explain that this can be better understood in contrast with other contemporary approaches; Section 3 provides an overview of the notion of linguistic simplicity in various authors from the 16th through the 17th centuries to trace the history of simplicity in English. In this section, corpus linguistics tools are used exclusively for the purposes of lexical reference and are not meant to produce a corpus-based analysis. The Conclusion sets out to highlight the evolution of the ideas and principles linking the Early Modern debates to Ogden’s Basic English.

2. *Simplicity in Basic English*

Before analysing the main features of Ogden’s Basic English and its underlying idea of simplicity, it is necessary to place it in the context of the auxiliary constructed languages between the 19th and the 20th century, as Ogden was no stranger to the international language movement: he was even invited as a consultant to the International Auxiliary Language Association in 1951 (Esterhill 2000: 5). The international language movement began with enthusiastic amateurs in the mid-19th century and reached maturity in the beginning of the 20th century, when it came to be increasingly dominated by academic linguists. These linguists styled themselves as the heirs of the Enlightenment tradition of searching the philosophical basis of language in order to shape a new neutral science-based language for the purposes of an improved international and intercultural communication, which will eventually end all conflict and support a peaceful and progress-driven society. These principles were particularly dominant in the early projects of the movement – Schleyer’s Volapük (literally “the world’s speech”, see Schleyer 1982 [1880]) and

Zamenhof's Esperanto (originally called *lingvo internacia*, see Zamenhof 1889 [1887]; 1905) – but they were still present, albeit as a form of resistance against linguistic and cultural imperialism, in the auxiliary languages of the mid-20th century, especially in the so-called “Esperantidos” (the constructed languages derived from Esperanto). Ogden clearly shared the same values and purposes:

The absence of a common medium of communication is the chief obstacle to international understanding, and therefore the chief underlying cause of War. It is also the most formidable obstacle to the progress of international Science, and to the development of international Commerce. (Ogden 1931: 13)

However, he opposed the assumed neutrality of Esperanto and its reformed versions (such as Ido, Mundolinco, Universal) as they were still based mainly on Indo-European languages and thus as difficult for learners from other continents as any already existing European language.

From the standpoint of an Eastern learner, [...] it is just one more European dialect, closely akin to Spanish or French, however much it may be simplified and systematised. If China were to offer world a form of Cantonese, unintelligible as such either in China or Japan, though similar in many points both to Chinese and Japanese, the rest of the world would hardly regard it as neutral; and in the same way the claim of Esperanto that it provides a neutral solution has no justification. (Ogden 1934: 10)

Moreover, he maintained that the adherents of constructed auxiliary languages did not address “the problem of simplification systematically” (1968: 7) unlike Basic; this is why Ogden's notions of “simplicity” and “simplification” are key to understand the principles underlying his approach. His distance from other linguistic projects is argued on scientific grounds, for instance while welcoming the US Bureau of Standards support of the movement for an international auxiliary language, he states the direction of his linguistic endeavours:

The achievements of science in the right direction are also usefully summarized, with respect to: the system of numbers; the metric system; the measurement of latitude and longitude; mathematical symbols; chemical formulae; time and the calendar; notation in music. (Ogden 1968: 8)

The “achievements of science” listed above are standards in the realm of mathematics, symbols and measurements; this is what Ogden praised of the scientific method and also how he conceived a global language, i.e. a matter of criteria established by an authority as a model. Based on the same principles, he therefore concluded that there were “statistical considerations” supporting English as the basis of a universal standardised language:

It is often stated that English is the language of 200,000,000 people, and this figure is then compared with the figures for French, German, Spanish, etc., with the implication that it would be invidious to be influenced by so small a lead, when the tide of national prejudice is running so high. Actually, however, English is the expanding administrative (or auxiliary) language of over 600,000,000 people, and financial reasons alone should convince even those who take statistics seriously that it is bound to expand more rapidly in the near future. (Ogden 1968: 7)

Here Ogden anticipated the international success of English as a lingua franca not only on numerical grounds in relation to the extension of the British Empire, but also in the crucial domains of finance and business due to the growing influence of the US economy on a global scale. This is also the reason why he advertised BASIC as the acronym for “British American Scientific International Commercial” with purpose of promoting it as a way to standardise the English dialects in the vital fields of economy and science as well as to improve international communication.

In addition to the statistical considerations supporting English as the basis of a universal standardised language, Ogden believed the English language possessed an inherent characteristic that made it special amongst the most widely spoken languages of the time: its natural analytic tendency that sets it apart from the highly inflected Romance languages, from the even more inflected Classical languages, but even from other Germanic languages, such as German:

the fact that English is the only major language in which the analytic tendency has gone far enough for purposes of simplification. Inflected systems are highly resistant to simplification, and their Latin origin is still only too evident in all the Romance languages of today. In the course of

centuries, however, most of the European speech systems have progressed considerably in the right direction, and the analytic tendency, [...]. English, both in its Anglo-Saxon and its Latin derivatives, has carried the process of simplification to a point where the final step was possible; and by the selection of its vocabulary from the word groups most adapted for universal purposes, irregularities of form and idiom in the Basic nucleus have been reduced to negligible dimensions. [...] The memorization of these irregularities is fortunately only a matter of days, or even hours; but since we have to admit them temporarily into Basic (i.e., until such time as Standard English, with its growing tendency to simplification, shall have progressed far enough to allow us to dispense with them if we so desire), [...]. Provided the exceptions are not too numerous, and have a significant historical background, they may even assist the memory. This does not mean that every anomaly which Basic includes can be excused or justified – many will doubtless pass away gradually, as linguistic analogy completes its inevitable work – but it serves to emphasize the negligible character of those irregularities which need give rise to real regret. (Ogden 1968: 14-15)

This is one of the most substantial differences between Ogden's morphosyntactic approach and the morphological typology of the major constructed auxiliary languages of the time. Whilst Schleyer's Volapük and Zamenhof's Esperanto were based on the grammatical models of synthetic agglutinative languages (such as Turkish, Finnish, Japanese, Tagalog, Nahuatl and Bantu languages) with a complex system of affixes (which can also be lexicalised into free semanteme in Esperanto) with neither exceptions nor irregularities, Ogden stressed the isolating analytic tendency of the English language – despite its intrinsic exceptions and irregular forms – as a natural propensity towards simplification; he even predicted that, once the usage of Basic would be sufficiently widespread, English would increasingly and naturally dispose of its imperfections. According to him, the evidence of the superiority of analytic languages lies in the Romance languages of nowadays, which progressively evolved “in the right direction”, from the intricacies of Latin's synthetic fusional morphology into more analytic structures. Consequently, another significant difference between Basic and the other constructed languages was Ogden's lexical approach: Ogden lamented that the artificial languages paid little attention to the simplification – i.e. reduction – of vocabulary (Ogden 1935: 8), which was his utmost concern. Through the

process of paraphrase, he aimed at reducing the English lexicon to its most essential lexemes: for instance, he affirmed that the word “Southerner” could be replaced with the more analytic phrase “a man from the South” and the word “octogenarian” with “an 80-year-old man” (1930: 14); for the purposes of comparison, both these expressions can be rendered in Esperanto with one word, the former being *sudaniĉo*, concatenating the following morphemes: *sud(o)* “south”, *-an-* “inhabitant”, *-iĉ-* “male”, *-o* “singular noun”, and the latter being *okdekjaraĝuliĉo*, which can be broken down to *okdek* “eighty” (more literally *ok* “eight” and *dek* “ten”), *jar(o)* “year”, *aĝ(o)* “age”, *-ul-* “person characterised by the quality expressed in the root”, *-iĉ-* “male”, *-o* “singular noun”.

The issue of Ogden’s lexical approach leads to possibly the most distinctive trait of Basic English: word selection. Whilst most of the earlier auxiliary language projects dealt equally with morphosyntax and lexicon, Ogden focused exclusively on vocabulary. Given that a constructed language with a rich vocabulary would require too great an effort on the part of learners, he maintained that the crucial element for a successful international language consisted in selecting a lexicon with a relatively small number of items that were to be “scientifically selected” (Ogden 1933: 1) according to their semiotic potential. Ogden’s views about semantics were deeply influenced by Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics (McElvenny 2015), which had informed his previous academic career culminating in his essay *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) written with his collaborator (and later Basic enthusiast) Ivor Armstrong Richards³. With Basic, Ogden intended to pursue the theoretical assumptions of his semiotic work to language, by stripping English of the “word magic”, i.e. the power of words to obscure the real meaning of our utterances, with the intention of fostering an open and straightforward communication amongst people. On this basis, Basic offered a minimal core vocabulary of what he claimed to be the most useful 850 words:

It is clear that the problem of a universal language would have been solved if it were possible to say all that we normally desire to say with no more words than can be made easily legible to the naked eye, in column form, on the back of a sheet of notepaper. The fact, therefore, that it is possible

³ For a discussion on the role of Richards in the history of Basic English, see Russo (1989).

to say almost everything we normally desire to say with the 850 words on the endpapers, which occupy about three-quarters of the space on the back of an ordinary sheet of business notepaper, makes Basic English something more than a mere educational experiment. (Ogden 1933: 4)

The key factor for a successful universal language meeting his criteria of simplification is therefore a controlled and limited vocabulary to pursue a “panoptic” language, i.e. a language that can be “seen at a glance”. The term “panoptic” is a key word in Ogden’s texts about Basic English; “panoptic conjugation” is the process that he developed to shrink the lexicon to 850 words. Starting from a “root word”, he traced the “radial definition routes” from which different semantic “conjugates” (as he called them) departed, with each branch adding an extra meaning to the previous node; using the examples above, the node “man” can have two branches, one denoting origin (“Southerner”) and one denoting age (“octogenarian”) (Ogden 1930: 13-14). He called these semantic relations “conjugates” as he imagined each root word as having an inflectional paradigm with increasing additional meanings⁴. Here comes the importance of paraphrasing in the lexical selection whereupon Basic English is based: only the root words extracted though these criteria – which he called “elimination formula” (Ogden 1930: 14) – are admitted in Basic’s core vocabulary, whereas all peripheral lexemes are replaced with paraphrases through the 850 words, whereby “Southerner” becomes “a man from the South”. The only limit to this process was the extension of the paraphrase: if it required more than nine words or it sounded “awkward” (a notion that he never clarified) the original word was supposed to be retained.

Ogden’s word list also provides insight into the author’s idea of simplicity when analysing not only the selection criteria, but also the nature of the lexemes resulting from the selection. The list includes (in Ogden’s terminology) 100 “operation-words”, 600 “things” (divided into 400 “general things” and 200 “pictured things”, i.e. which can be taught through the use of visual aids) and 150 “qualifiers” (100 in the category “general qualifiers” and 50 in “opposites”). Whereas the categories of “things” and “qualifiers” can respectively be associated with the

⁴ For a more detailed description of panoptic conjugates and their relationship with Ogden’s theory of meaning, see McElvenny (2018: 77-92).

grammatical classes of nouns and adjectives, the “operation-words” are more complex to define, as it covers a blurry range of classes: verbs, prepositions, determiners, conjunctions, adverbs, cardinal directions (!), etc. By rejecting the conventional and established terms of grammar, Ogden deliberately undermines the role of morphosyntax in language learning and assumes that grammar can be acquired from vocabulary (he only mentions “five simple rules covering the formation of plurals, compounds, derivatives, comparatives, and adverbs” in Ogden 1932: 7). A glance at the numbers makes it immediately apparent that one part of speech in particular is predominant, as nouns constitute more than 70% of the lexemes listed; conversely, another grammatical class – i.e. verbs – seems to appear in a surprisingly reduced number. Only 18 of them (including two modal verbs, *may* and *will*) are listed in the section “Operation words”, which constitutes a mere 2% of the total.

Another difference between Ogden and the other creators of international constructed languages lies in that he was not so focused on phonology and spelling as he was on lexicon. One of the main concerns of the creators of international auxiliary languages – e.g. the above-mentioned Volapük, Esperanto, all the Esperantidos, Latino sine flexione (Peano 1903) Novial (Jespersen 1928), Sona (Searight 1935), Interlingua (Gode and Blair 1951), Frater (Phạm 1957), Neo (Alfandari 1961), etc. – was to establish a finite phonemic repertoire with phonemes that could be “easily” distinguished and uttered by at least the majority of speakers of European languages (with more or less successful outcomes, one may argue) as well as to create a “simple” regular spelling system mostly based on the correspondence between phoneme and grapheme, following the models of the mainly phonemic orthographies of Classical Latin, Ancient Greek, Spanish, Italian and most Slavic languages (both in Latin and Cyrillic scripts). By contrast, Ogden overlooked this aspect and justified this by adopting a completely different approach to phonology and spelling.

A chief obstacle to the spread of English has hitherto been its phonetic irregularity, the frequency with which the same symbols are used to represent different sounds, and the uncertainties of stress. There is the fact that the word *fish*, as Sir Richard Paget has noted, might appear as *ghoti* (*gh* as in *enough*, etc.); and if dealt with in the same way *foolish* might be spelled in 613,975 different ways. To master such details in a vocabulary

of 20,000 words, or even 2,000, necessitates an amount of drudgery which has given phoneticians and advocates of synthetic languages their opportunity. With the Basic vocabulary, however, such irregularities are reduced to a minimum in which, by treating each word as an individual, the learner can even profit by its peculiar appearance in written form as an aid to memory, and historical continuity can thus be preserved. The 850 sounds being fixed by the gramophone records, their written forms can be memorized as individual entities, with no special emphasis on any principle but that of stress. (Ogden 1934: 57)

Even though he claimed that Basic's vocabulary was free from irregularities, one can but notice that in the 850-word list there are homophones such as "I" and "eye". Essentially, Ogden asserts that the lack of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation does not constitute an obstacle for Basic English learners due to the limited number of lexical entries that they are required to memorise; he therefore shifts the focus from spelling to lexicon by suggesting that learners should consider the written form of each word as an individual graphic segment like symbols or logograms such as Chinese characters. However, Ogden eventually acknowledged the inherent limits of English spelling and of this approach, he thus opened up to the possibility of a forthcoming spelling reform:

Phonetic (spelling) reform can thus be left to pursue its separate path. It may find Basic a useful ally, and Basic may later profit by its progress. Hence the importance of Basic for educational work which cannot allow itself to be involved in controversies such as any violent departure from the habits of centuries must always engender. (Ogden 1968: 12)

The ultimate issue to address in the argument for the adoption of Basic English as an international standard was the nationalistic aspect. English, even in its Basic form, was still a national language. Ogden opposed this view on practical grounds, as he believed that English simply happened to be the best option in those historical circumstances:

The objection that many Frenchmen and Indians would not be in favour of the adoption of any form of English as an auxiliary language is not more serious than the objection that many diplomats and military men are not in favour of peace – as an argument against international arbitration. (Ogden 1931: 107)

In the aftermath of the First World War, the adoption of an auxiliary, albeit originally national, language had to be the priority over conflict and, finally, war. Ogden did not consider language exclusively as a means of communication, but also as the main factor influencing a person's mentality and perception of the world (the connection with Sapir is shown in Joseph 1996). In this respect he supported a mild (intended as patronising) form of cultural colonialism, which was not meant to replace and erase foreign cultures, but to enrich them for the sake of those people who were not lucky enough to be born as English speakers and, therefore, with an advanced English mindset. This view is clearly expressed by Ogden's life-long friend and collaborator Richards, who worked as a Basic English teacher in China for a decade:

[the Chinese] need an understanding of an enormous number of ideas, feelings, desires and attitudes that they can only gain through some form of Western Language. In practice this means some form of English. (Richards 1935: 45)

By forcing people to speak in the same language, Ogden and Richards believed that they could use the same words and, thus, share the same understanding and thoughts; and this would eventually end all human conflicts.

In conclusion, the analysis of Ogden's writings provides an insight into the simplification criteria of his linguistic approach, which markedly diverged from the idea of simplicity underlying the other contemporary international constructed languages. First and foremost, there was no need to create a new language *ex novo* if an existing language already displayed certain characteristics, despite the potential problems of cultural colonialism that the adoption of a national language might have caused. That language existed and it was English, a language that was supported (in his view) by a successful commercial and scientific mentality that would be beneficial for the rest of the world. Whereas all the other constructed languages struggled to gain a wider base of speakers and general popularity, English was already spoken by millions of people around the globe and was (and still is) a leading language in science and business. In addition to this, English met certain criteria of simplicity: a mostly analytic isolating language (definitely less inflectional than other Indo-European languages) with short words and a supposed limited number of irregular forms. The only final step towards "the right

direction” was to work on the vocabulary of English so as to reduce the potential misunderstanding caused by an excessive lexicon with ambiguous meanings; in this way the entire lexicon could be represented as a finite collection of symbols (perfectly in line with Pearce’s semiotics) which could also help Basic learners by decreasing the amount of lexical material to memorise. Therefore, Basic English can be viewed as a controlled language, i.e. a restricted form of the grammar and vocabulary of an existing language aimed at reducing ambiguity and complexity.

If we leave aside for a moment his patronising tone and the questionable intrinsic superiority that he attributed to his own language, Ogden actually exposed the fact that most of the other auxiliary constructed languages, which boasted cultural neutrality and a supranational status, were in fact mostly Euro-centric in all aspects of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon; therefore the issue of language nationality was just shifted from one nation to a group of Western nations. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that, in a period when there seemed to be room for competition, Ogden had already realised that the commercial, scientific, political and military power of the English-speaking world had already turned English into the *de facto* lingua franca worldwide.

3. *A short history of simplicity in English*

James McElvenny posited that Ogden’s Basic must have been inspired, if not influenced, at least to some extent, by the constructed language projects of the previous centuries (2018: 23). According to McElvenny, Ogden “was almost certainly familiar” with the work of John Wilkins, George Dalgarno and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (2018: 100). Ogden would have known these antecedents through his readings, editorial work and translations, which made him a member of a virtual community of knowledge stretching back into the 17th century. Ogden’s position towards his native language was naturally unthinkable in earlier centuries, when English was only gradually shifting from an insular minority language to the main language of a united nation with a strong and influential literary and scientific culture. English was still far from becoming the language of a colonial and commercial empire, and processes of standardisation were underway. Nonetheless, Ogden, his contemporaries, and their Renaissance and Enlightenment predecessors

all wrote as language reformers, and if we look beneath the individual schemes and projects, proposals for reform seem to display striking continuities, most significantly an enthusiasm for simplicity.

The universal language schemes of the 17th and 18th centuries have received extensive scholarly attention (Eco 1993; Knowlson 1975; Maat 2004; Stillman 1995 among others). More recently, Kristen Poole began to uncover the extent to which “the concerns of biblical hermeneutics made their way” into constructed language projects (2019: 123). Informed by recent historiography, Poole contended that “a long view” of the Reformation can help scholars gain insights into processes of inheritance, re-purposing and adoption of themes and terminology across the 16th and 17th century. Similarly, whilst taking a long view of the concept of simplicity in the history of linguistic ideas, we wish to gain insights into what appears to be an established tradition with its implicit and explicit sources. After examining Ogden’s idea of simplicity we will now explore the Enlightenment and the Reformation language debates as the backdrop to the development of ideas about simplicity in English.

The term “plain” has an intriguing historical dimension. Plainness was a crucial concept in Renaissance hermeneutics and it was set as an ideal in such influential treatises on language as Thomas Wilson’s *The arte of retorique* (1553). The nexus between language and religion has been defined with special acuity by Kristen Poole and Judith H. Anderson. Anderson pointed out the particular role of figurative language and investigated the functioning of metaphor in the early reforms of the established Church in Tudor England (2001 and 2005), whilst Poole explored how “efforts to define the ‘literal’ – and related or synonymous terms, such as ‘plain’ and ‘simple’” within 16th century religious treatises produced “extended meditations on the nature and structure of language” (2019: 124).

The notions of simplicity and plainness overlap very interestingly, if partially, at the level of lexis. If through word reduction Ogden aimed to target what he saw as an excessive lexicon with ambiguous meanings, the lexicographical activity of Early Modern authors reflected anxieties concerning the lexical expansion and the influx of foreign and obscure terms. Dictionaries and collections of the “hard words” in English proliferated from the early 17th century; the earliest, Robert Cawdrey’s *Table Alphabeticall* (1604), aimed to explain “hard vsuall English wordes,

borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c. [...] by plaine English words” (cit. in De Witt and Noyes 1991: 13). Plain words, as opposed to “strange” words borrowed from foreign languages, supposedly granted a fairer access to knowledge and to the correct understanding of meaning, not least to the meaning of the Scripture (Blank 2006: 233-4; Brown 2001: 140; Nevalainen 2000: 341-2).

In order to explore the semantic contour of the word “plain” in a large number of texts in various centuries, we have employed the online corpus query tool Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004 and 2014), which can be used to carry out lexical and morphosyntactic analyses with a number of functions, such as word sketches (the grammatical and collocational behaviour of a word). Sketch Engine includes a large number of inbuilt corpora, such as The Historical Book Collection, which comprises texts published between 1473 and 1820 from the collections Early English Books Online (EEBO) Phase I, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) and Readex’s Evans projects. We have focused on the adjective “plain” in the English Historical Book Collection corpus and run a word sketch in order to understand the behaviour of the term, the contexts wherein it typically occurs, and the words wherewith it is frequently paired. The partial overlap between “plainness” and “simplicity” is perhaps best illustrated by the adjectives associated with “plain” in our corpus: these are “simple”, as in the phrase “plain and simple”, “evident”, “obvious”, “clear” and “easy”. The results point then to a connection between the semantics of “plainness”, religion and language. The single most frequent term occurring in conjunction with “plain” is in fact “Scripture”, which appears as the top collocate in nominal sentences like “the Scripture is plain” and amongst the top three collocates in prepositional phrases such as “plain from the Scripture”. The top five collocates in adjective phrases are “term”, “English”, “truth”, “meaning” and “dealing”, with “Scripture” in sixth position, and amongst the top five collocates in nominal and prepositional phrases we find “word”, “text” and “context”. As an example, the noun phrase “plain words” (and variants) gives 2,327 results (2.36 per million) dating from 1485 to 1800, with the vast majority of occurrences in texts published between 1500 and 1699, and in works of Biblical exegesis, catechesis and controversial literature. Finally, the most frequent collocates in terms of verbs are the *verba dicendi* (speak, tell) alongside the verbs “seem”, “appear” and “be”.

From this simplified overview of the behaviour of “plain” in historical texts there emerges how a preoccupation with “plain speaking” has been shared amongst English writers across the centuries.

3.1. *Plainness: The 16th century*

Examples of usage of “plain” in 16th century texts highlight the strong positive connotations of the term. Plain speech was the language of truth and virtue, and somewhat a commonplace stretching back to classical Antiquity: “The communication of trueth, is simple and plain”, recited an adaptation of Cato’s *Distichs* annotated by Erasmus published in English in 1553 (retrieved from the Sketch Engine). Some might be familiar with the adage in the epistle to the reader in John Stow’s first edition of the *Chronicles*, “Of smoothe and flatteryng speache remember to take hede: For Trouthe in playn wordes may be tolde, of craft a lye hath nede” (1565: [a4]). In his famous *Epistle of Comfort* the Jesuit Robert Southwell urged to honour exemplar Catholic lives: “Let all historyes witnesse their sincere dealing, playne wordes, simple attire, frugal tables, vnfained promises, assured loue, & amity, and most intier & friendlye conuersation one with an other” ([1587]: 90).

According to rhetoricians and grammarians, plain speech meant clear and explicit language:

In speakeyng and wrytyng nothyng is more folyshe than to affecte or fondly to laboure to speake darkely for the nonce, sith the proper vse of speach is to vtter the meaning of our mynd with as playne wordes as maye be (Sherry 1550: [A8])

“Playne wordes” were thus understood to be antithetical to “dark”, obscure speaking. In John Sleidan’s *Commentaries concerning the state of religion and common wealth*, published in a translation by John Daus in 1560, it is apparent that obscurity may be caused by ambiguous words, as opposed to plain ones: “It ought to be vttered with playner wordes, to take awaye all ambiguitie” (OED s.v. ‘plain’).

Another sense of plainness was the bare language void of figures or rhetorical artifice, as underlined by John Day, who, describing the structure of epistles in *The English secretorie*, would oppose “plain terms” to rhetorical construction:

The first place is Exordium, a beginning or induction to the matter to be written of, Narratio or Propositio, each serving to one effect, wherein is declared or proponed, in the one by playne termes, in the other by inference, or comparisons, the very substance of the matter whatsoever to be handled (Day 1586: 22).

The 16th century was a period of heightened interest in language, doubtless favoured by the religious and cultural revolutions that were taking place, through the popularisation of the printing press, the vernacularisation of the Bible, the discovery of the New World and increased language contacts. As is well known, this was an age of extraordinary expansion of the English vocabulary, a phenomenon that elicited different responses from Tudor intellectuals. The pace of lexical borrowing from the classical languages gave rise to the Inkhorn Controversy, which opposed supporters of lexical innovations and those who heavily criticised what was seen as an overuse of superfluous, magniloquent terms that were hard to understand. Whilst a number of English writers readily adopted foreign influences as an opportunity for language enrichment, others advocated for a rationalisation of the spelling and lexicon for the advancement of English (Blank 2006: 222; Nevalainen 2000: 346, 359). In a famous letter to Thomas Hoby, the translator of Baldassarre Castiglione's *Courtier*, Sir John Cheke claimed to be of the opinion that "our own tung should be written cleane and pure, vnmixt and unmangeled with borowing of other tungen" (Castiglione 1561: no sig.). Sir Thomas Elyot believed that a nobleman must speak "none englisshe but that which is cleane, polite, perfectly and articulately pronounced" (1537: 18v). Even more significantly, Thomas Wilson promoted "plainnesse" in "elocution":

Doeth wit reste in straunge wordes, or els standeth it in wholsome matter, and apt declaryng of a mannes mynd? Do we not speake, because we would haue other to vnderstande vs, or is not the tongue geuen for this ende, that one might know what another meaneth? [...] Therefore to auoyde suche folie, we maie learne of that most excellent Orator Tullie, who in his thirde booke, where he speaketh of a perfect Oratoure, de lareth vnder the name of Crassus, that for the choise of wordes, foure thinges should chiefly be obserued. First, that suche wordes as we vse, shuld bee proper vnto the tongue, wherein wee speake, again, that thei be plain for all men

to perceiue: thirdly, that thei be apt and mete, moste properly to sette out the matter. Fourthly, that woordes translated from one significacion to another, (called of the Grecians, Tropes) bee vsed to beautifie the sentence, as precious stones are set in a ryng, to commende the golde. (Wilson 1553: 87-8.)

The language of the Scripture was typically described as “plain”, and any intentional or unintentional failure to understand the sacred sources was a heinous error for theologians. Allegations of tampering with the word of God and of the Apostles, of “corrupt” interpretation and deceitful translation were part of the stock vocabulary of religious controversies in the 16th century. The question was central, for instance, to the polemical battle between William Tyndale and Thomas More in the early 1530s:

And thus good chrysten reders ye maye clerely se, that all Tyndals proper processe of kynge Dauyd, concernyng the order of hys eleccyon, that he was therby preserved for euer frome all dedely synne, ys clerely comen to noughte / and all hys wordes reproued by the very playne wordes of scrypture (More 1533: cxlix).

Further,

All these textes lo do Luther and Tyndale say, that the catholyke chyrch iugle from theyr trew sense, bycause they teche them as god and the holy goost hath spoken them & verely ment and entended by them. And all these textes do these holy sectes so restore agayn to theyr ryght sense and vnderstandyng, that they clene destroye them, and constrewe them clene contrary bothe to the playne wordes and menyng (More 1533: cclxxxix)

In particular, the relationship between plainness and simplicity becomes explicit in the work of the Scottish exegete Robert Rollock, who advocated the plain meaning of Scripture. Rollock maintained that the Scripture does not have “any ambiguitie or doubtfullnesse in it”, it is “simple in sense and signification” (cit. in Poole 2019: 125). Rollock glossed the term “plaine” with sets of synonyms (i.e. “simplicitie”, “pure”, “single”) and antonyms (i.e. “ambiguity”, “doubfulness”, “amphibology”)

demonstrating “that the word [...] signifies a meaning that cannot be broken into parts but is single” or that a plain meaning “is one that has no multiplicity, no polysemy” (Poole 2019: 125). As is well known, the univocality of the Biblical vocabulary was a matter of contention between reformers and conservatives. The moot point was the authentic meaning of the Scriptures. Multiple readings were not possible in that they brought ambiguity to the Scripture; yet the Scripture was “plain”, so there must be only one pure authentic meaning.

The question of meaning, and in particular the contest between the figurative and the literal, was central to the debate on the Eucharist. In defending his *Apology of the Church of England*, the bishop of Salisbury John Jewel asked, “For what can be saide more plainely, then that, whiche Ambrose saithe, Breade, and Wine remaine stil the same they were before, and yet are changed into an other thinge?” (1567: no sig.); the controversialist William Fulke refuted an opponent’s literal reading of the words of Christ at the Last Supper:

And where he saith, that none of ye fathers teacheth, yt these words: This is my body, &c. be words figuratiue, it shal suffice, to oppose Augustine, who in plaine termes saith these words: Except ye eat ye flesh of the sonne of man, &c. are a figuratiue speach. (Fulke 1581: 458)

The notion of plainness had thus a deeply intertwined linguistic and religious valence. On the opposite side, ambiguity was a source of uncertainty, doubt and hermeneutical error.

3.2. *Simplification: The 17th century*

McElvenny pointed out that the need to establish “correct” associations between name and object had a long tradition in the history of English and Continental linguistic thought. It concerned John Locke and several of his contemporaries, “chief among these” John Wilkins and Gottfried Willhelm Leibniz, “whose constructed language projects aimed in part at creating philosophically sound linguistic expressions” and “may have provided inspiration to Ogden in designing Basic English” (2018: 23). “Some of the most prominent features of Basic”, McElvenny further argued,

the treatment of metaphor, the notion of “universal grammar” with a campaign against verbs, the emphasis on the visible – have quite probable antecedents in the Enlightenment projects of Dalgarno and Wilkins, with which Ogden was almost certainly familiar (2018: 100).

John Wilkins, a Dean and a fellow of the Royal Society, published his constructed language project in 1668, the *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*. Around the same time, other attempts were undertaken to construct a language free from ambiguity. Ideas had been “in the air” for several decades and collaborative discussions started at Oxford in the mid-1650s (Cram 1985: 36). There was a whole circle of members of the Royal Academy around and behind Wilkin’s *Essay*, and other treatises appeared. One was published by the schoolmaster and preacher George Dalgarno, the *Ars Signorum* in 1661. Dalgarno’s character and language were influenced by his comparative studies of shorthand systems and his belief in the superiority of affixation, deriving from his Hebrew studies. His character had a visual component in that it relied on the representation of things, rather than sounds (Maat 2004: 40). Outside scholarly milieus, the works by the merchant Francis Lodwick deserve mention, *A Common Writing* and *The Ground-work*, published in 1647 and 1652 respectively, preceding both Wilkins and Dalgarno. In spite of their theological differences, these authors all situated their ideas of the origins and development of language within a biblical context in which the loss of the Adamic language resulting from the fall of man and the *confusio linguarum* at Babel represented the key sites (Poole 2003). They were also connected by the implicit or openly declared practical implications of their projects. It is not a chance that one of the earliest schemes was conceived by a professional engaged in trading like Lodwick; Wilkins himself would state that “that most obvious advantage which would ensue” from adopting his character and language was “of facilitating mutual Commerce, amongst the several Nations of the World, and the improving of all Natural knowledge” (*Ep. Ded.*). The need for an auxiliary language in 17th century Europe was widely felt for pragmatic reasons that included trade, international exchange and business. We will now focus on Wilkins’ *Essay* in closer detail as a test case for our longer view of the connections posited by McElvenny (2018) and Poole (2019).

Wilkins believed that natural languages have defects that can be avoided. Describing the development of his “real Character” he “found it necessary” to abstract “from those many unnecessary rules belonging to instituted Language” (1668: *Ep. Ded.*). Beginning with the letters of the alphabet, these are often “in several respects both Redundant, and Deficient” (15). Vowels “have several sounds” (15); “Some words are distinguished in writing, and not in pronunciation” and *vice versa* (16); and besides the defects of the alphabet or letters “there are several others likewise in the Words of Language”, especially “Equivocals” or “the ambiguity of words” (17). Furthermore, natural languages abound with “Anomalies and Irregularities in Grammatical construction” (18). Wilkins aimed for a regular and perfect system capable to “refer directly to what knowledge and thought are about, rather than using the imperfect medium of ordinary language” (Aarsleff 1992: 24). Wilkins’ universal language would therefore work based on a number of corrections, compared to natural languages:

1. The words of it should be *brief*, not exceeding two or three Syllables; the Particles consisting but of one Syllable.
2. They should be *plain* and *facil* to be taught and learnt.
3. They should be *sufficiently distinguishable* from one another, to prevent mistake and equivocalness; and withal *significant* and *copious*, answerable to the conceipts of our mind.
4. They should be *Euphonical*, of a pleasant and graceful sound.
5. They should be *Methodical*; those of an agreeable or opposite sense, having somewhat correspondent in the sounds of them. [...] (1668: 414, Wilkins’ italic)

Wilkins’ simplification entailed a work on phonology, semantics and vocabulary; in particular, fewer words would suffice, since “the multiplying of words, about things that are plain enough of themselves, doth but contribute to the making of them more obscure” (1668: 24) and “the most facil and natural order to be observed in this, will be, to begin with the 40 common Heads or Genus’s” identified in part II of his *Essay* (1668: 441).

3.3. *Difference and ambiguity*

In a passage that echoes the views of 16th century rhetoricians, Wilkins expressed scepticism towards ambiguity and ornaments:

And though the varieties of Phrases in Language may seem to contribute to the elegance and ornament of Speech; yet, like other affected ornaments, they prejudice the native simplicity of it, and contribute to the disguising of it with false appearances (1668: 18).

Encapsulated in this evaluation there is the idea that simplicity is original, “native”, altered by addition. Addition is neither an ornament nor a form of improvement, but rather a kind of falsification. 17th century language theory viewed the history of languages as a process of decay and degeneration, of a breaking down into dialects of an original perfection and unity. This deterioration of the universal language led to the loss of an effective means of communication. Wilkins understood then words as accidental, without any intrinsic connection with the objects and entities they signified. However, he believed that they maintained a relationship with the natural world, as underscored through the very structure of the *Essay*, in which the description of the “real character” follows Wilkins’ mapping of the entities and phenomena of the world. If words are figure of the world, differences in language are figure of different views of the world. However, Wilkins was not a pluralist: difference must be the product of some misunderstanding of the real nature of things, leading to inconsistency, contradiction and error. Aarsleff described Wilkins’ *Essay* as “the largest and most complete work in a long tradition of speculation and effort to create an artificial language that would [...] ‘repair the ruins of Babel’” (1992: 24). Wilkins seemed to believe that a common language would favour natural religion, so that disorder, strife and sectarianism would vanish.

A key passage in Wilkins’ presentation of his plan allows us to understand his faith in the potential for a perfect language to overcome division. In Wilkins’ worldview, linguistic misunderstanding was to be blamed as the source of groundless strife; his design seems to betray the conviction that language uniformity would lead to conformity in religion and politics. It ought to be remembered that Wilkins lived at a time of

turmoil, marred by an internecine religious and political conflict that had culminated in the devastating civil wars of 1642-51. Rather than discussing whether Wilkins' project had any religious motive, however, we wish to pay attention to his use of language in this extract:

this design will likewise contribute much to the clearing of some of our Modern differences in *Religion*, by unmasking many wild errors, that shelter themselves under the disguise of affected phrases; which being Philosophically unfolded, and rendered according to the genuine and natural importance of Words, will appear to be inconsistencies and contradictions. And several of those pretended, mysterious, profound notions, expressed in great swelling words, whereby some men set up for reputation, being this way examined, will appear to be, either nonsense, or very flat and jejune. (Wilkins 1668: *Ep. Ded.*)

The idea of “unmasking errors”, the reference to “false appearances” as opposed to “native simplicity” and the language of deceit and “disguise” takes us back to the Reformation controversies and to the particular concern of the English reformers with Catholic dissimulation. One of the tropes of anti-Catholic polemic was hypocrisy, which allegedly led to an uncontrollable compulsion to “disguise” the truth with false appearances. This involved them personally, Catholics were the devil in sheep's clothing, and textually in the interpretation of the Scripture. Protestants would accuse Catholics “to loade and disguise the sentence” of the Scripture “with many waste woordes, that you may in so doing hide the error” (Charke 1581: F1). On the Catholic side, failure to understand the complex meaning of the Scripture and allegations of an imperfect knowledge of classical languages and doctrines were recurring weapons against English reformers, who due to their ignorance “understand not soe cleere doctrine but huddle up matter” (Persons 1581: [B5v]).

Kristen Poole pointed out that well in the 17th century Bishop Samuel Parker's *Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1671) demonstrates the continuity of these concerns. Aligning conformists with literalism and sectaries with allegory, Parker identified “exegetical differences as ‘the most material difference’ between Church of England conformists and radical sectarians” (2019: 126-7). The bishop claimed how “we express the Duties and the Precepts of the Gospel in plain and intelligible Terms, whilst they trifle them away by childish Metaphors and Allegories” (cit. in

Poole 2019: 126). The work of Wilkins, also a man of the Church, further shows how linguistic thought was organised around the polarity between simplicity and clarity on the one hand, and complexity and obscurity on the other. In the second part of his *Essay* Wilkins presents the catalogue “of all those things and notions to which names are to be assigned” (1668: 22); names must be assigned to “universal” or “transcendental” notions, which he defines based on kinds, causes, modes and differences (1668: 25). Everything is structured into sets of binary oppositions. Amongst differences that define transcendentals we find the following opposition:

SIMPLICITY, *mere, sheer, clear, fine, plain, right, pure, unmixed, Ingredient, single, uncompounded.*
MIXEDNESS, *mingle, compound, blend, shuffle, Medly, Miscellany, promiscuous, temper; Commixtion, complex, complicate, confound, intermingle, Hodg-podge, Gallimaufry, Rhapsody, Centon, dash, brew.* (1668: 28, all Wilkins' italic)

Plainness pertains to “simplicity”, and in Wilkins' binary world, the “plain and facil” imperative of his constructed language existed in opposition to a number of concepts. As laid out further on in the *Essay*, plain is that which is “Evident, Perspicuous, clear, express, obvious, easie, facil” connected with the verbs “explain, explicate, unfold, illustrate, open, make out” and antithetical to “obscure”, that which is “Dark, abstruse, riddle, aenigmatical, deep, profound, hard, difficult, mysterious” and to “intrigue” (1668: 47). According to Poole, the poles of the conflict as identified by Wilkins (“plain” vs “obscure” and “simplicity” vs “mixedness”), “are coded exegetic terms that continue a long association of Catholics with allegory and Protestants with perspicuity” (2019: 130). The direct correlation of signifier and signified sought after by the language reformers of the Enlightenment, in other words, inherited and repurposed the early reformers' defence of plain and simple language against Catholic obscurity (2019: 127).

Although he conceded that the Bible “provided an unquestionable framework for any linguistic theory” on language origin and diversity, Maat argued that in universal language projects religious motives should not be exaggerated (2004: 9-10). We wish to stress that we do not intend to discuss motives, but to trace the connections behind what we see as a continuous concern with simplification from the earliest projects to Ogden, and we agree with Poole that these connections also point to the discourse of biblical

interpretation and religious debate. In summary, a mistrust towards the ambiguous nature of natural languages seems to have its roots in the distant past and in an anxiety over doubt and error. The pursuit of plainness became a banner and a mission that had evidently much to do with favouring clear unambiguous communication in English, a language that was only starting to gain confidence in the 16th century and would eventually rise over Latin as a means for international communication and trade through the following centuries. At the same time, the pursuit of plainness retained its deeper connections with the exact interpretation of the Scripture, of the Fathers, of the word of God. By the 19th century, the religious underpinnings of this idea appear to have been forgotten and to have completely shifted onto another plain; yet, a mistrust towards ambiguity appears to have remained solidly anchored in the mind of language reformers, and the proposals on how to correct or overcome it display striking continuities through the centuries.

4. *Conclusion*

The primary aim of this study was to show that Ogden's approach to language simplicity was deeply entrenched in the history of the English language since the Reformation. To support this claim, we have focused on two levels of analysis: linguistic aspects and contextual aspects.

The linguistic aspects revolve around Ogden's semiotic theory. The design of Basic as a systematic vocabulary with minimal grammar derived from standard English is deeply rooted in the ideas and principles outlined in Ogden's semiotic dissertation *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923). Panoptic conjugation – the method for selecting Basic's vocabulary – and lexical isomorphism were simply a practical implementation of the method of definition proposed in the book. The idea that morphosyntax can be seen as a mere natural consequence of vocabulary and that analytic structures are inherently superior are similarly overarching topics in the essay. The notion of overall language simplicity as a consequence of a "simple" vocabulary stretches back to the 16th century concept of "plain speech" as a source of truth and virtue; the opposite of this idea of "plainness" was the obscurity resulting from the ambiguity of a language prone to figures of speech and rhetorical artifice (cf. Sleidan 1560, Day 1586), which is what Ogden meant by coining the term "word-magic". Whereas in the 16th century the main concern was the danger of tampering

with the interpretation of the word of God and the scriptures (cf. More 1533), Ogden aimed at a fetishised (possibly idolised) notion of objectivity that could be attained only through a “panoptic language” to be seen “at a glance” without any ambiguity; this is why the English vocabulary needed to be stripped of unnecessary, redundant, nebulous words, exactly as Rollock (in Poole 2019: 125) argued for simplicity “in sense and signification” in the crucial lexicon of religious practice. Therefore, the concepts of “plain” and “simple” overlap with the notion of “literal” (explained in visual terms, i.e. “seen at a glance”) as opposed to “figurative”, meant as “deceptive”. Objectivity is thus what the eye can see. In the 17th century this visual aspect is even more emphasised by Dalgarno, Wilkins and Leibniz. Unlike Ogden, Wilkins’ idea of simplification encompassed phonology and syntax; nevertheless, we can clearly distinguish the same underlying approach in establishing “scientific” criteria to select or create a finite number words for an effective communication, because in this view the main source of semantic obscurity (and thus conflict) is the “multiplying of words” (Wilkins 1668: 24). A perfect language would result in a perfect thought to be shared by all human beings, thus leading to the end of divisions, whereas figurative and vague expressions are doomed to lead to misunderstanding, inconsistency, contradiction and error. Ogden seems to support the same strong version of linguistic determinism, since the overarching assumption of Basic English is that language and its structures limit and determine human knowledge or thought, as well as thought processes such as categorisation, memory, and perception (“the idea that because our thought is based on language, and because it is important for our thought to be clear, a great respect for form might be a help in the development of our minds”, Ogden 1968: 58). By using the same language, humans should be able to overcome conflict and live in peace.

In fact, the communities of language of reformers of the 19th and of the 17th centuries both worked in post-war contexts (whereby the contextual aspects). Ogden developed his project in the aftermath of the First World War, whilst Wilkins and contemporaries lived through the English civil wars. Both endorsed the universality of language as a means to favour understanding and consent, and thus to end human conflicts. Ogden’s admiration for the scientific method and the “achievements of science” had a significant role in his conception of a global language as a set of

criteria established by an authority (1968); similarly, though increasingly understood as problematic, the link between the emergence of universal language projects and the “new science” has been the object of extensive scholarly attention (Maat 2004: 7-9). If the 17th century notion of simplicity is to be understood in the scientific/philosophical sense of that which is not compound, as Wilkins vocabulary helpfully emphasises (1668: 28), simplification denotes process of reduction to “singleness”. In constructed language projects, the number of words must be reduced, but also their components, or their length, and their associated meanings. The idea of word elimination would continue all the way to Ogden, and insofar as it was heralded as a way to promote monoreferentiality and avoid ambiguity, it brought forth some of the principles that help us see constructed languages akin to scientific languages. In the 19th as in the 17th centuries, a language viable for nurturing scientific progress, international commerce, peace and prosperity, had to be a plain and simple language.

Alongside the evident similarities that can be highlighted across the centuries, however, a long view of constructed language projects enables us to appreciate a number of distinctive aspects. In particular, a comparative diachronic approach helpfully assists relating universal language schemes to the cultural and linguistic contexts in which they were conceived. Herein lies a crucial difference: if the 16th and 17th centuries reformers faced the breaking down of a “unity”, first religious and shortly after linguistic (Latin as the *lingua franca* of the Renaissance “Republic of letters”), for 19th century linguists there was not an immediate notion of cultural nor linguistic unity to refer to, and by that time English had acquired a completely different status. Ogden’s position with respect to English as the natural language basis for his controlled language project was simply inconceivable two centuries earlier.

In view of the above arguments, Ogden’s Basic English holds a special significance in the history of international auxiliary languages as he anticipated two major trends both within the movement and in the linguistics policies of the 20th century: he anticipated the “analytic shift” in constructed languages, which from Volapük and Esperanto tended to develop more isolating structures; more importantly, he envisaged the role of the English language as a global *lingua franca* in the 20th and 21st centuries.

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