



**Unity Through Language:
BASIC English by C. K. Ogden**

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Inspired by the work of Jeremy Bentham a century earlier, and beginning in the 1920s, C. K. Ogden, a British writer and Director of the Orthological Institute of Cambridge, embarked on a long project to produce an international language, BASIC English. It was the vision of an exceptional man of his time, before global communication became easy and when the rather new idea of an “international” language was born of the hope for peaceful international cooperation – a dream still not fulfilled – that had been brewing for a long time. Bentham, a century before, advocated social freedoms and utilitarian purposes not tied to nature-based or religious motives. During the 19th Century, several forces were at work to change the way languages might operate: growth in communications across national boundaries, a workers’ movement arising from the conditions of industry, and boundary-spanning efforts at resource discovery and ownership – all these further pushed the idea of globalism. World War I effects added urgency. Ideals of universalism and encyclopedism, not new to the 20th century, received at the turn of the 20th century a boost from the critical convergence of technological, political, and social changes, flavored with practical economic management. BASIC English, the name Ogden devised for his language, was apt and descriptive, because the BASIC word-list consisted of about 850 words only (600 nouns, 150 adjectives, 100 other parts of speech), and because the name was an acronym for British - American - Scientific - International - Commercial: a sphere of language and activities to which this system might apply to facilitate interactions. There was a translation book – 7500 words with their BASIC equivalents, a textbook, and some translations to various languages. Eventually there were “representatives” (noted in a review in 1933) in other countries to



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support the dissemination of BASIC. Ogden claimed that English should be or already was a world language; and that a world language was necessary to bring world peace – cooperation or the lack thereof being the root of world wars. At the time of its introduction as a series of small books, BASIC English generated attention, support, and criticism. Interpretations and many reactions followed. BASIC was flawed and full of idiosyncracies and contradictions – but a wonderful invention. Ogden’s abbreviated BASIC was language of its time, with a utilitarian purpose, clearly stated, not language naturally evolved, or of robust artistic expression. Its purpose was to allow a quick introduction to international English. It was bounded by requirements of range, economy of effort, and uniformity. BASIC was an attempted antidote to “word-magic” – the power of words to engage and divide and confuse. It was the imperfect representation of one vision of practical universal communication. The presentation proposed here will describe more fully the motives for and details of the BASIC language and its origins.