



## Beyond Babel: Louis Couturat (1868-1914) and the Pursuit of an International Scientific Language

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This paper zooms in on a particular case of scientific internationalism at the brink of the 20th century: the attempt by French mathematician and philosopher Louis Couturat (1868-1914) to create and install an international scientific language. In 1901 Couturat formed a *Delegation for the Adoption of an International Auxiliary Language* together with the French mathematician Leopold Leau (1868-1940). Its members included scientists from several European nations who joined forces through a series of negotiations to generate an international language. In 1907 they proposed such a new language, an improved version of Esperanto called Ido.

Towards the end of the 19th century the proposition of installing an international language, whether it was an existing national language, a revival of Latin, or the creation of an artificial language, was a familiar one for intellectuals. The dream of installing World English as an international language was one of the most prominent attempts to internationalize a national language; Esperanto and Volapük were two of the most successful attempts to install an international artificial language. What distinguished Couturat's language project was that he explicitly presented it as a scientific language. Ido was not only meant *for* science in that it was to support the traffic of knowledge through publications and at conferences, but it was also to be *of* science in that was the expression of the rationality of science and its supranational character.

Its basic components and functions as a means to efficiently communicate on an international level remained the same in Couturat's many pamphlets, books and articles on the subject until his death in 1914. With a vocabulary enriched through the adoption of new stems which were "chosen according to the principle of maximum internationality",<sup>1</sup> and with a grammatical structure that was said to be freed from useless rules and confusing exceptions through the application of logic, Ido was, to use Couturat's modest description, "nothing but a purified and idealized extract, a quintessence of the European languages".<sup>2</sup> As such he presented it as a scientific solution to what he perceived to be a worrying discrepancy. On the one hand the technical ability to communicate and travel across national borders progressed rapidly. On the other hand the linguistic means of international intellectual communication developed only slowly and inefficiently.

With the emergence of a rapidly expanding international community since the second half of the 19th century, at the brink of the 20th century universal exhibitions, international conferences and organizations had become regular events. Consequently the issue of multiple national languages, which was magnified by a rise of national languages in the scientific community since the second half of the 19th century, was discussed on several occasions towards the end of the century. Yet, while

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<sup>1</sup> Couturat, Louis (1910). 'On the Application of Logic to an International Language', *International Language and Science: Considerations on the Introduction of an International Language into Science*, Couturat, L. & Jespersen, O. & Lorenz, R. & Ostwald, W. & Pfaunder, L. London: Constable and Company Limited. p. 52

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51



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Couturat's belief in the necessity of an international scientific language was shared by some, the increased traffic of differing mother tongues was generally not perceived as a major problem in the international scientific community.

It will be argued that Couturat's distinct pursuit of an international scientific language was forged out of the contrast between on the one hand his experiences as a philosopher and mathematician during the establishment of the *Revue de la Métaphysique et de la Morale*, which culminated in 1900 when he attended the First International Philosophical Congress, and on the other hand his attitude towards the prevalent militaristic nationalism that had split an entire nation in two opposing camps during the Dreyfus affaire. Later that year his experiences were complemented by a decisive intellectual influence when Couturat explored the Gottfried Leibniz *Nachlass* in Hannover. Being both a mathematician and a logician, Couturat interpreted Leibniz's philosophy and his work on a universal characteristic as an ideal synthesis between reason and language. Providing Couturat with the means to overcome what he considered as the imperfect nature of national languages, he went on to articulate his very own and distinct early 20th century notion of international language.

**Biography**

Fabian de Kloe (1982) is currently a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht. His research explores early 20th century attempts to create and install a universal scientific language. Fabian received his MA "Arts & Culture" (Cum laude) in 2006 from the same faculty.