

The Meteoric Rise and Fall of BASIC English

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (August 2020)



Four People Laughing, Bartolomeo Veneto, 16th C.

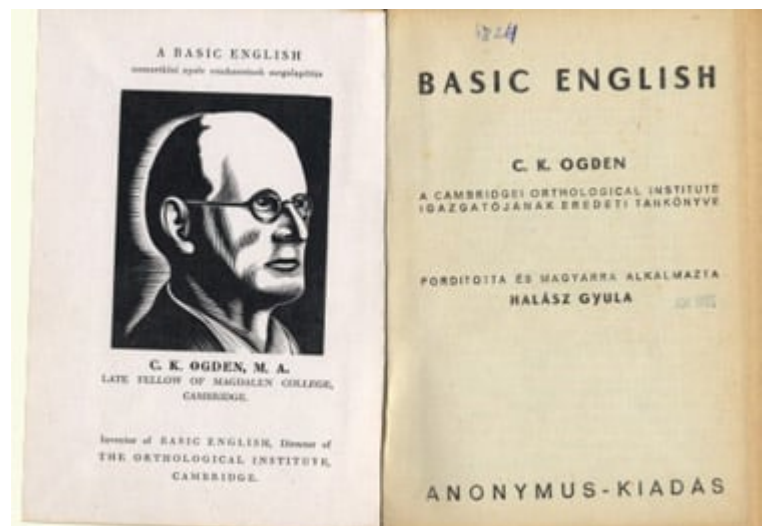
A favorite of parents and teachers among fables and aphorisms that many kids learned to appreciate in the early grade school years is *The Tortoise and the Hare*, by ancient Greek writer and storyteller Æsop, born around 620 BCE in Thrace on the Black Sea coast. Many of his stories have achieved immortality and widespread distribution in diverse formats such as cartoons, films, and television. His stature has grown with the centuries so that he is often thought of as a philosopher.

One moral all children were supposed to take away with

them is that the race goes to the slow and steady, methodical competitor determined to finish a marathon who outlasts the brilliant sprinter. The analogy well suits the competition between what have been the two most successful candidates for the role of an international auxiliary language, Esperanto (the tortoise) and the meteoric rise and fall of what was known as "Basic English" (the hare).

BASIC (an acronym for British American Scientific International Commercial) English was the project and brainchild of a renowned linguist, and Cambridge scholar in the classics, C. K. Ogden (1889-1957), who seized a golden moment just prior to World War II to capitalize on the immense joint power and prestige of the British Empire which Churchill believed could (or should) continue to prosper, combined with the preeminence of Great Britain on the world literary, economic and scientific stages and the new superpower commercial, military and political status of the United States, creating the rationale for acceptance of a simplified version of English as a universal language.

To promote BASIC, Ogden founded the Orthological Institute in 1927 with its headquarters on King's Parade in Cambridge. From 1928 to 1930 Ogden set out developing his ideas on Basic English. He attracted the attention of writer James Joyce and in



1932 published a translation of a passage of Joyce's difficult novel, *Finnegan's Wake*, into BASIC. Using such an example may have increased Ogden's reputation as a scholar of English literature but did little to bring BASIC to the attention of the general public or win adherents to its utility.

Nevertheless, the problems inherent in learning English for many foreign students remained in place, especially compared to Esperanto's known advantages of no exceptions to any rule, its easily enunciated pure vowel sounds, no difficult consonant combinations such as the "th" sound and a vocabulary based on readily recognizable cognates in the major Romance and Germanic families.

"BASIC" claimed to offer the learner a "shortcut" to a usable form of simplified English. Its one great advantage (more apparent than real) over standard English was its enormous reduction in the size of its vocabulary, permitting only 850 words capable of being reproduced on a single sheet of paper and supposedly capable of expressing the approximate meaning conveyed by more than 22,000.

Unfortunately, it held out little hope for those foreign students already dismayed by the inconsistencies of English spelling, difficult pronunciation, syllabification, notorious irregular verb conjugations, shifting stress and grammatical complexity. The project received the initial but brief enthusiastic support of several luminaries including Sir Winston Churchill who managed to convince President Roosevelt of the advantages and practicality of the idea and even Prime Minister to be of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. By contrast, Gandhi had demanded the return of India to its religious and linguistic heritage of Hindi and even expressed approval of Esperanto ([see](#) "Why Esperanto is Different," *New English Review*).

In his first public statement about BASIC in 1943, Churchill said its adoption would be "a gain to us Britons far more durable and fruitful than the annexation of great provinces and a major aid to build the forthcoming empires of the mind." He established a cabinet level committee on BASIC ENGLISH and in a report on March 9, 1944 traced the steps to be taken by the government and through the British Council to eventually promote Ogden's project through agencies in the

U.K. and abroad. Helping him in this endeavor was a long-time colleague at Cambridge and author of several introductory books on BASIC was Ivor Richards, who had travelled extensively in China in the 1930s and enabled him to become a major advocate of BASIC outside of Great Britain.

In June, 1946 to end wrangling over many contentious issues with the government, Ogden and Richards decided to assign the copyright for BASIC to it for £23,000 and complete the BASIC English Foundation in Cambridge with a grant from the Ministry of Education.

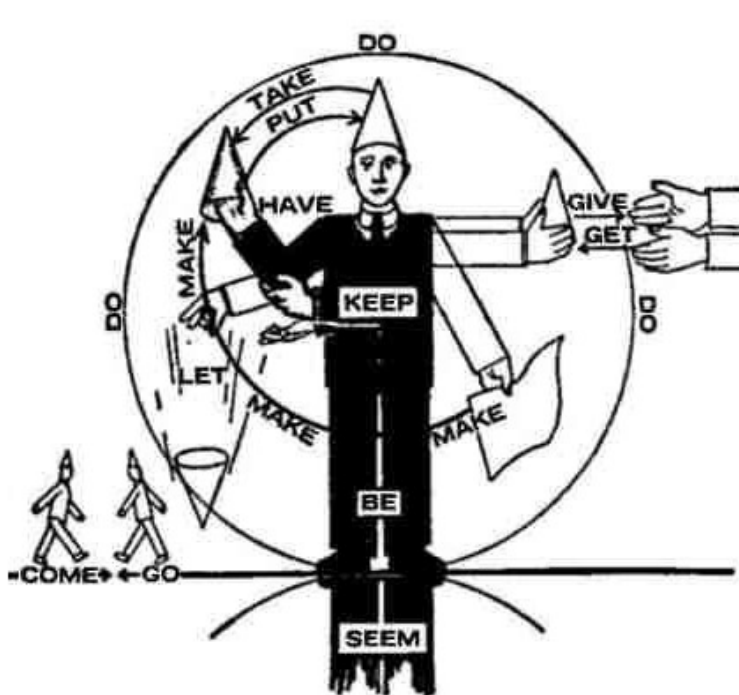
Ogden believed that if the immense vocabulary of English could be reduced by a shortcut of a barebones minimum of 850, but with the same set of grammar rules, accompanied by a reduction in the many irregularities of the standard language, it could fulfill the joint purpose of quickly enabling the learner to correspond and understand the simplified version with an enormous worldwide audience of goodwill partners who were supposedly ready to adopt the BASIC limitations as well as initially prepare the learner for a future transition to the standard language. Until that goal was achieved, BASIC would function as an international auxiliary language. For a period of approximately twenty years (1930-1950), BASIC appeared to its supporters and enthusiasts to be the best hope for a solution to the language barrier that has plagued mankind since the Tower of Babel.

Ogden was convinced that a few shortcut principles for such a truncated version of English would also promote world peace and harmony and lend themselves to being widely disseminated and this blinded him to the accusation immediately felt by many critics abroad that he was wittingly promoting British interests and as camouflage for an English-speaking world. After all, in his younger days as a distinguished scholar at the University of Cambridge, he had founded the Heretics Society, a non-conformist society open to women in which religion and other subjects were discussed

freely by students in the Cambridge Magazine he edited and through which he supported liberal, cosmopolitan, and pacifist ideas. This brought him the support of likeminded individuals in the British cultural establishment such as George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and Julian Huxley.

These 850 essential words to be learned by all students of BASIC were divided by categories into 100 elementary words (the pronouns, prepositions, motions, directions, and quantities) as well as the 18 basic “operators” shown below in the diagram, 400 “general words” that learners could use as nouns or verbal nouns with the *-ing* ending, 200 things illustrated with pictures and 150 “qualities and their opposites.” The minimal set of 18 verbs (the so called “operators”) are: come, get, give, go, keep, let, make, put, seem, take; be, do, have; say, see, send, may, and will, which in conjunction with other words in Basic, primarily prepositions used as phrasal verbs take the place of all the other verbs in the language.

Diagram for a Student: The 18 Operating Words (verbs)



MAKE the paper into a hat. *HAVE* the hat. *PUT* the hat on the head. *TAKE* the hat from the head. *KEEP* the hat here.

LET the hat go. GET the hat from someone. GIVE the hat to someone. SEND the hat to someone. GO from this place. COME to this place. BE doing. SEEM to be (doing). DO any act. SAY something. SEE something.

The Preferred Past Tense form:

Instead of "I attempted to come," say, "I made an attempt to come." (avoiding the many irregular past tense forms.

Even what seems like an essential verb in everyday speech at the earliest age of a child, "want" is missing from the 18 operators because it cannot be paired with prepositions easily to create phrasal verbs. So, the resort of BASIC is to use "have desire."

Many native English speakers prefer using short phrasal verbs so this limitation should not be a major departure from how native English speakers frequently speak, e.g. Ogden argued for extensive use of such *phrasal verbs*, so that they are always preferred instead of ordinary verbs. For example "go forward" instead of advance; "go backward" instead of retreat, "give up" instead of surrender, "make holy" instead of sanctify, "given to the idea" instead of dedicated. When we enter a room, we "go in," when we leave, we "go out," etc.

While basic bodily needs are attended to in the list of basic vocabulary so that the individual words for taste, smell, feel, hearing, and seeing are permitted, but not eat. In the many biblical passages dealing with the dietary laws of the Old Testament in Leviticus , instead of "Ye shall not eat" BASIC has to rely on the circumlocution of "You may not have this for food."

Many students whose first language is not English find it difficult to employ the same verb for dozens of idiomatic expressions and metaphors when the precise meaning depends on which preposition accompanies the verb and determining the context of the situation.

This is readily apparent in Basic English translations from literary works where the 18 operators serving as verbs are insufficient and must be supplemented by words that can function either as additional verbs or verbal nouns (with an *-ing* ending, as in fight or fighting, eat, eating, swim, swimming, and so on. This meant that a translator, always a native speaker of standard English would have to rewrite an original text, massively changing the original content so as to be able to effectively create an entirely new text without the imaginative-emotional literary character and syntax of the original. See a comparison of Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* in the original and its BASIC equivalent below as examples of how the two differ at the end of this essay.

Both the BBC and the Voice of America would eventually use broadcast varieties derived from Basic English (called "Special English"), with a much greater vocabulary size and at a slower rate of speech on specific themes as well as simple grammatical constructions that avoided the awkward BASIC rules and very limited vocabulary.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm and speed, BASIC faltered, slowed to the pace of a tortoise and is largely of historical interest today. Fabio Sammarchi of the University of Bologna has comically referred to what BASIC actually became a unique example of a "Dead Devised Language"; (see Sammarchi, Fabio, unpublished Ph.D. thesis; *The Past, Present and Future of BASIC ENGLISH; How C. K. Ogden's Language Can Be Interpreted in Our Days*, University of Bologna, 2014.)

To Ogden's dismay, BASIC came to feature in several prominent literary visions of the future, all related to a

“master class.” In the novel, *The Shape of Things to Come*, published in 1933, H. G. Wells depicted it by name as the imposed lingua franca of a new authoritarian elite that succeeds in uniting the world and establishing a world government. The popularity of the book and a film version only increased the suspicions of other nationalities who saw it as the servant of British imperialism.

In 1944, almost at the same time as Churchill’s “second thoughts” about BASIC, Rudolf Flesch, writing in the mass circulation *Harper’s Bazaar*, asked “How Basic is Basic English?” and his answer was “It’s not basic and it’s not English.” Flesch was an Austrian-born naturalized American author (noted for his book *Why Johnny Can’t Read*), who was in England during the war and a strong advocate of plain English in the United States. His publication in an American monthly journal made no impact on the British government that was already enamored of BASIC. Flesch was not even a native English speaker! Arrayed in its support were some of the leading lights in the British literary establishment led by Winston Churchill.

Nevertheless, Flesch correctly identified the major weak points: The vocabulary is too restricted, and thus the text ends up being awkward and more difficult than in standard English, and that no empirical study verified BASIC’S exaggerated claims. He pointed out the absurdity that the Basic speaker cannot eat, sleep, awake, kick, jump or laugh, but he has to have a desire, be sleeping, get awake, give a kick, take a jump, have food, have a laugh, all of which strike the native speaker as cumbersome, awkward or absurd.

At times, drastic circumlocutions were also necessary for describing some objects and situations. Andrew Large, in his book *The Artificial Language Movement* (Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987), cited particularly amusing translations to show how cumbersome BASIC was in practice and how outlandish to a native speaker. “This watermelon tastes good” is rendered in

BASIC as "This large green fruit with the form of an egg and a red sweet inside has a good taste." (p.170).

Ogden answered criticisms of this type by explaining that BASIC was for the learner with no prior background in English and that it was only meant as a temporary device.

At just about the same time as FDR's disenchantment with the idea of BASIC, U.S. foreign policy strongly veered in favor of appealing to the subject peoples of Asia, and Africa. Solemn promises had been made by the U.S. government to grant Philippines independence following victory. BASIC was regarded as the brainchild and pampered baby of British imperialism. It was seen in a much less favorable light by June, 1944 when President Roosevelt wrote to Churchill, "I wonder what the course of history would have been if in May, 1940, you had been able to offer the British people only blood, work, eye-water and face-water."

This sarcastic jab at the rhetorical deficiency of Churchill's most famous lines and penchant for oratory, was of course predictable, as Ogden himself was clear on the inappropriate use of BASIC for its intended audience of readers in serious literature but it clearly signaled an awareness of zero American interest in the project.

A further irreparable blow to BASIC's image was made by George Orwell who became familiar with BASIC while working for the BBC (1940-45) and was initially favorable to the idea but would later become highly critical. He used it as the model for "Newspeak" in the epic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). It is not surprising that even the existing internal auxiliary language enjoying some success at the time, Esperanto, also suffered from Orwell's concept of Newspeak and that any "devised language," might be used to "dumb people down" and prevent them thinking for themselves by excusing injustices with euphemisms. In Orwell's future 1984 society "Big Brother," the totalitarian leader proclaims and justifies that

“War is Peace,” “Freedom is Slavery,” and “Ignorance is Strength.”

Like BASIC, Newspeak preferred to use words that are verbal nouns such as thinking rather than abstract nouns such as “thought” that can give rise to both nuance, and ambiguity. “Shall” is replaced by “will” and “whom” was totally eliminated and replaced by “who.” This has actually occurred over the past two generations among many native English speakers, most likely because it sounds too literary for ordinary speech.

Orwell initially appreciated Ogden’s attempt as well meaning, but he had had the experience of having served in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma for five years from 1922 to 1927. It was an inspiration for his 1934 novel *Burmese Days*, and made him a strong promoter of ending the British Empire by granting full independence to the colonies. He was determined to express this view in the essay “Politics and the English Language” (1946), an influential work that criticized the “ugly and inaccurate” written English of his time and examines the connection between political orthodoxies and the debasement of language. He was even more caustic at the upper-class pretensions of the staff of the BBC in reading the news or reading literature aloud on the air due to their effete snobbishness and preference of “received pronunciation” (R.P.) that avoided any regional dialect.

Orwell wrote, “When the Voice of Britain is heard at nine o’clock, better far and infinitely less ludicrous to hear “aitches” (words spelled with an initial H but not pronounced) honestly dropped, than the present priggish, inflated, inhibited, school-ma’amish arch braying of blameless bashful mewling maidens!”

Orwell’s attack hit its mark. Since then, the BBC has drastically revolutionized its policy, encouraging a much more informal delivery and all the regional dialects in the U.K. It

also does not use nearly as many metaphors inherent in the language as these are difficult for a foreign audience.

Another prominent British writer, Evelyn Waugh criticized his own 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited*. In the preface to the 1959 reprint he wrote how he looked back on the very idea of BASIC with a sense of revulsion . . . “It was a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster—the period of soya beans and Basic English—and in consequence the book is infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language that now, with a full stomach, I find distasteful.”

Much like Orwell's *1984*, science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Gulf* (1949) postulates how humans of superior intelligence band together, and keep themselves genetically separate, thereby creating a new species and develop into a hidden and benevolent “ruling” class. They are trained in “Speedtalk,” in which every English word is replaced with a single phoneme, as an appropriate language for a race of genius supermen. Readers aware of BASIC were thus given several fictional futuristic views of how Ogden's idea of a severely reduced vocabulary could be carried to its extreme.

Another giant of English language and literature with a penchant for devised mystical other-worldly languages and known as the “Father of epic fantasy literature,” J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), author of the bestselling works *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* (total sales of 200 million copies and translated into 34 languages including Esperanto) was a renowned Professor of English from 1945 to 1959 at the great rival of Cambridge, the University of Oxford.

Tolkien indirectly challenged Ogden on BASIC's underlying assumptions and utility. Moreover, by asserting his enthusiastic support of Esperanto as a practical International

Auxiliary Language. In an influential 1931 talk, *Secret Vice* (edited after his death in book format by his son Christopher), Tolkien praised Esperanto and expressed its importance and “desirability to unify Europe . . . I particularly like Esperanto, not least because it is the creation of one man, not a philologist and is therefore something like a human language bereft of the many inconveniences due to too many successive cooks.” (an obvious oblique criticism directed at Ogden and his cumbersome Orthological Institute at Cambridge.

Moreover, he clearly established himself a whole new genre of Mythical Fantasy in cultivating the aesthetic value of his own devised languages, “Elvish” and its successor “Quenya.” Tolkien had begun devising the language around 1910 and restructured the grammar several times until it reached its final state. In contrast with Ogden’s great familiarity with the traditional languages of classical antiquity, Latin and Greek, Tolkien’s work as a linguist extended to research into Finnish, Welsh and Gothic. He simply was enchanted by their sounds and use of alliteration as important elements in his world of fantasy and imagination that he felt Ogden had ignored.

His work even attracted the attention of the Foreign Office that hoped his experimenting with fantasy languages might enable him to do cryptographic code-breaking research. In January 1939, he was asked whether he would be prepared to serve in the cryptographic department of the Foreign Office in the event of national emergency. He agreed and started a course in March at the London HQ of the Government Code and Cypher School but was reluctant to leave his academic post. In any case, Ogden, rather than respond in a debate challenging BASIC, preferred to remain indifferent to Tolkien’s criticisms and consequently drifted into obscurity.

Since Ogden’s death in 1957, the dominance of English in information technology, publishing, medicine, diplomacy,

world affairs, finance, and science has grown markedly, stimulating a reexamination of Basic English and how some of its principles might be incorporated into English language teaching.

Both the BASIC ENGLISH Foundation and the Orthological Institute did not survive long after Ogden's death. The former closed its doors in 1955, and the latter in 1962. Alan P. Herbert, a member of the Parliament during the Second World War and a regular contributor to Punch, commented on the legacy of BASIC after translating Hamlet's famous 'To Be or Not to Be' soliloquy.

*To be or not to be, that is the question
If it is best for the mind to undergo
The stone-sending cords and sharp-pointed air-going
instruments of unkind chance,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by standing
in their way, put an end to them.*

He then, rendered his own judgement on BASIC by writing, "Never, in the history of men's disagreement, did such great numbers have so great a debt to such small number." (Herbert 1944, in Punch). This comment reflected the same view of "too many cooks" as Tolkien had made about BASIC.

How Widespread is English?

The percentage of the world's population that speaks English as a first language is no greater today than it was in 1900. According to CIA's The World Factbook, native English speakers represent only 4.68% of the world population. There are many more speakers of English as both a first and second language today (but still only somewhere between 12 and 15% of the world's population), The teaching of English is a major source of revenue in the United Kingdom and the British Council makes the most of these facts in its promotions to study English in the U.K. Neither it, nor the BBC has any

reason to resurrect Ogden's BASIC.

Esperanto's considerable success and achievements are, of course, miniscule by comparison with the immense appeal and utility of Standard English and often "invisible" because there is no palpable "homeland" or powerful patron to provide material rewards but nevertheless the steady tortoise keeps on going. It no longer has a serious competitor. BASIC, the Hare, dropped out long ago.

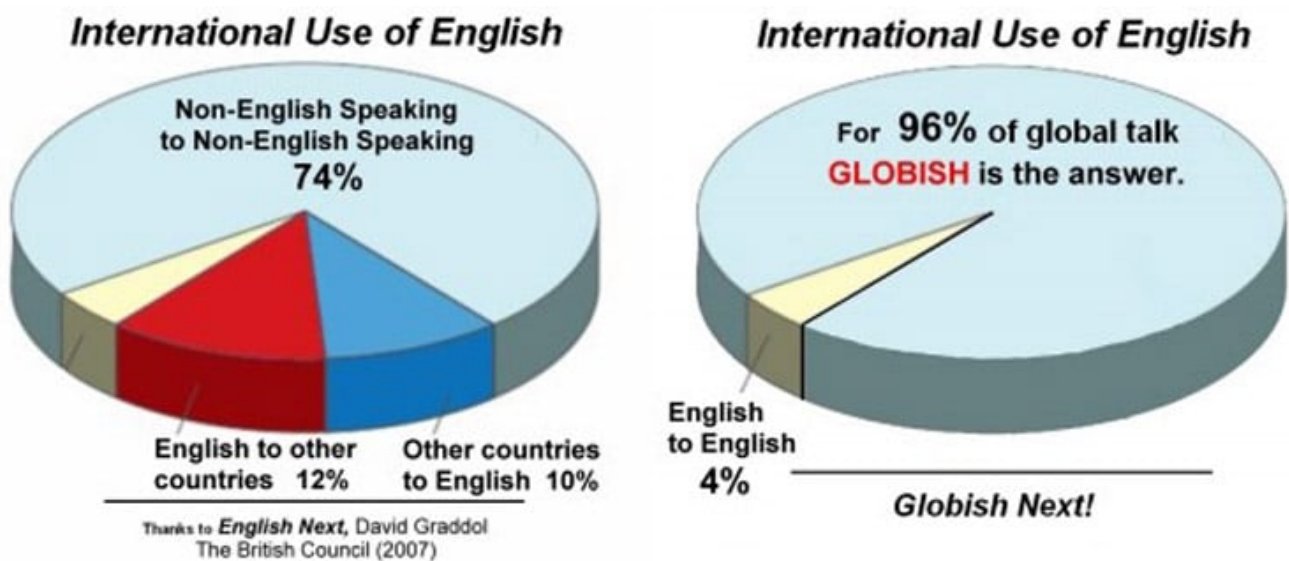
BASIC'S Legacy and Globish

Would it be fair to say that BASIC is "dead and buried?" Yes and no. The *yes* applies to a resurrection of BASIC in content. The *no* refers to Ogden's vision that some form of English would be the most useful of any single national language for international use. The reality of our world today is that English is more important than ever. It is the most common vehicle of international personal communications.

This was so obvious to Jean-Paul Nerrière, a French businessman and computer engineer at IBM, that he sought to take BASIC as a guide on exactly what to avoid in order to save its premise of English as the ascendant world language for the next century. The solution is called "Globish" which is not really a new language but a simple set of rules and preferences. They are used with an agreed upon limited vocabulary of 1,500 words (twice that of BASIC), short sentences, a basic syntax of using the active voice, and an avoidance of idiomatic expressions and metaphors. It makes use of extensive hand gestures in face to face contact to get the point across. It is not useful for reading or writing or career advancement in fields where research into English language source is essential. It is the preferred means of communication for spontaneous, social gatherings for those for whom English is not their first language.

His French nationality absolves Nerrière of any accusation that he is promoting British or American interests. His two books, *Don't Speak English, Parlez Globish!* and *Découvrez le Globish*, became bestsellers in France and were also published in Spain, Italy, South Korea and Canada. As the title of the first book implies, he is not using Globish as a stepping-stone to learn "proper English" at an advanced level. He explains, "It is designed for trivial efficiency, always, everywhere, with everyone" and that, "English at the level of Globish is now owned by people in Singapore, Ulan Bator, Montevideo, Beijing and elsewhere."

This trend was already apparent when more than two decades ago the popular Eurovision Song Contest that used to insist that the contestants sing in their native languages allowed English instead and as a result, practically all the of them today sing in English.



If he is correct, perhaps, C. K. Ogden may reemerge from obscurity and be regarded once again as a valued pioneer in the age-old struggle to overcome the Language Barrier.

APPENDIX

Comparison of Texts in Standard English and BASIC:

Gettysburg Address (Lincoln's original)

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. —*Abraham Lincoln, November 19, 1863*

Gettysburg Address in BASIC the true BASIC verbs, modals and phrasal (verbs are in bold):

Seven and eighty years have gone by from the day when our fathers gave to this land a new nation—a nation which came to birth in the thought that all men are free, a nation given up to the idea that all men are equal. Now we are

fighting in a great war among ourselves, putting it to the test if that nation, or any nation of such a birth and with such a history, is able long to keep united. We are together on the field of a great event in that war. We have come to give a part of that field as a last resting-place for those who went to their death so that that nation might go on living. It is in every way right and natural for us to do this. But in a wider sense we have no power to make this place an offering in their name, to give any mark of our respect, any sign of our belief. Those men, living and dead, who had no fear in the fight, have given it a name far greater than our poor power to make additions or to take away. The future will take little note of what we say here; will not long keep it in mind. But what they did here will never go from memory. It is for us, the living, to give ourselves here to the work which is not ended, which they who were in the fight have taken forward to this point so well. It is for us to give ourselves here to the great work which is still before us, so that from these dead who are in our hearts we may take an increased love of the cause for which they gave the last full measure of their love; so that we may here come to the high decision that these dead will not have given themselves to no purpose; so that this nation, under the Father of All, may have a new birth in the hope to be free; and so that government of all, by all, and for all, may not come to an end on the earth.

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