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IT's Tower of Babel Meets Esperanto

In 1878, a 19-year-old Polish student named L.L. Zamenhof introduced his attempt to bridge the language chasms created over the centuries with a language he called Esperanto. At this point in Zamenhof's brief lifetime, Poland was a part of the Russian empire, and his town's population was comprised of four major ethnic groups: Russians, Poles, Germans and a large group of Yiddish-speaking Jews. Zamenhof was described as saddened and frustrated by the many quarrels between these groups. He supposed that the main reason for the hate and prejudice lay in mutual misunderstanding, caused by the lack of one common language that would play the role of a neutral communication tool between people of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

Zamenhof's project, which he called *Lingwe uniwersala* or universal language, was the birth of the language of Esperanto. While pursuing a career as a medical doctor, Zamenhof continued to drive his vision toward reality with the firm belief that people have an inalienable right to communicate.

Some of Zamenhof's founding principles included a) Esperanto was an additional language, not a replacement for a people's chosen, and often religiously guarded, native tongue; b) in its design, Esperanto needed to be inclusive of many different types of languages in construction and usage, but different enough to ensure that it stood on its own (read non-proprietary); and c) Esperanto would never be "owned" by any entity; rather, it would be treated as a fully open-language standard that could be shared and enhanced by anyone who wanted to contribute to the cause.

Beyond this being a fascinating stand-alone subject, the parallels to the IT data chaos that we've created since the '60s in the world of computing are astounding. The project of data computing, which has created the biblical equivalent of a "confusion of languages," has just edged a bit over 40 years old. But with the exponential crescendo of data sharing brought together by the Internet, the problem is just as pervasive as that which Zamenhof sought to solve, albeit not quite as dramatic.

Attention all IT managers, CEOs, even CFOs who care to the point of misery about the wanton explosion of cash being spent on migration and conversion projects: Esperanto for data is available in the form of eXtensible Markup Language (XML)!

The founding principles of XML are remarkably similar to the spirit of Esperanto. First, XML is intended to be a bridge, a "black-box" translator between different data representations. It is not intended to replace, but rather

provide data exchange with what you already have. Read: no data conversion or migrations necessary. Second, authored and administered by an independent Internet standards organization called the World Wide Web Consortium or W3C (www.w3c.org), XML is non-proprietary. You can safely bet your business on this movement without locking yourself into a vendor's future or controlling interest. And third, in keeping with the current rage toward computing democracy evidenced by Linux, XML is an "open" project. This means anyone with an interest can and should contribute to the definition and efforts to shape it into the tool that is needed to bridge the gaps of data.

In a recent briefing we were providing for a customer, the CIO cut to the chase with one question, "Are you saying that my Java and .NET applications can simply exchange data with the mainframe, without migration and conversions, and without my Java guys learning the mainframe?" Beautifully said—the answer is yes.

Now XML implementations don't happen by magic; you don't just "install" XML and suddenly everything is interchangeable. But if your IT department is still discussing or actively involved in yet another platform or data migration without fully giving the XML and Web Services capabilities careful consideration, chances are critical time is being spent and enormous amounts of dollars are being wasted, only to be repeated again for the next platform or application.

The point here is to ensure that executives take their IT management to task to make sure they fully understand the potential, and exhaust the possibilities (at least in theory) of XML and Web Services before embarking on any other approach. Being uninformed isn't an excuse.

Zamenhof had a beautiful vision to fundamentally change the world for altruistic reasons that are easy to agree with. It's even inherent in the word he chose for its name; the word Esperanto translated to English means "hopeful." Martin Luther King Jr. left us with yet another of his inspiring thoughts, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." There's hope for this data confusion yet.

And that's z/Bottom Line. **Z**

About the Author

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