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Léon Bollack and His Forgotten Project

H. S. Chapman

Léon Bollack (1859 – 1925), creator of a language project designed to compete with Esperanto, was born in the same year as Dr L.L. Zamenhof, but, whilst there are some similarities, in many ways there are stark contrasts between the two men. There have been numerous biographies of Zamenhof in a large number of languages, and in 2009 there were celebrations, lectures, conferences of all sorts to celebrate 150 years since the birth of the founder of Esperanto, a number of books following on from Korĵenkov's history of Esperanto (2005), offering a more critical view of Zamenhof's life and his role in the Esperanto movement; in stark contrast the 150 years since the birth of Bollack went completely unnoticed.

Wikipedia in all its different language versions provides no information at all about Léon Bollack apart from the publication of the language which bore his name. Bollack was born in 1859, but little has been known about him apart from his published work, and even that has not all been recorded. "No biographical material is available, and the authors have been unable to ascertain the year of his death" ("Blue-sky thinking?: Léon Bollack and ..." Hornsby, David; Jones, Mari C., 2006, *Language Problems & Language Planning*, Volume 30, Number 3, 2006 , pp. 215-38). Wikipedia (January 2010) speculated wrongly that he died during the First World War. In fact, he died on 23 September 1925. He lived for most of his adult life at 147 Avenue Malakoff, Paris, an address which appears on his publications.

Léon Bollack was born into a Jewish family in Paris on 4 May 1859, the son of Hermann Bollack and of Rachel Léon Amélie Picard, daughter of Alphonse Mayer and Sara Lucie Lévy. His father was from Kreuznach in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, where the family name had been present for centuries. His wife was from a Portuguese family with roots in the Netherlands too (information from Andre Convers) and his father-in-law was founder of the Synagogue in rue Buffault. A plaque in this synagogue built by Sephardic Jews commemorates Hillel, whom Zamenhof admired, amongst others. Bollack's Jewish roots received no attention at the time just as Zamenhof's Jewishness was systematically and consciously not mentioned by the French pioneers of Esperanto. Indeed, the French organizers of the first Esperanto Congress in 1905 went to great lengths to obscure Zamenhof's Jewishness, and the result was noted—with evident pride—by Zamenhof's close Jewish associate, the oculist Emile Javal: "Of 700 articles in the press, only one mentioned Zamenhof's Jewishness." In contrast, Léon Bollack was "outed" as a Freemason in a 1911 work by people who saw Freemasonry as a dangerous enemy within France.

Léon and Amélie had three children: a son, Lucien Armand Bollack (1892 – 1963), who became an engineer who died in Nice, and daughters Fanny Louise Bollack (1898 – 1958), and Léontine Rachel Alice who died in 1969. They share the family grave in the Jewish part of Montmartre cemetery, Paris. Léon dedicated his first book in his planned language in 1899 to his beloved children, Alice, 8½, Lucien, 7, and Louise, 15 months. Lucien went on to become an inventor whose "radioelectric control device" was accorded a U.S. patent in 1940. In light of Bollack's oft-cited proverb in his constructed language, "Ate manu seri reru" (All men are brothers), it is particularly poignant that his niece Suzanne Léontine Vorms, née

Bollack, was deported from Paris in 1944 and died with her husband and son in Auschwitz during the Second World War.

It is not known how Léon Bollack made the fortune which he was to invest in his planned language. It may have been as a result of property development by his father. He was a near neighbour of Alfred Nobel (the Nobel of dynamite and Nobel Prize fame) in the Avenue Malakoff, a fashionable quarter near the Arc de Triomphe and Bois-de-Boulogne.

First presented to the world in an 1899 work entitled simply “La Langue Bleue – Bolak”, Bollack’s Blue Language (which mixed a posteriori and a priori elements) emerged at a time of great enthusiasm for artificial languages. The last quarter of the nineteenth century had seen a number of competing proposals, and campaigns in support of Volapük (invented in 1880, by Johann Martin Schleyer), and shortly afterwards Esperanto (first published in 1887, by Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof), had already enjoyed a measure of success.

Between 1899 and 1902 a series of publications were published on La Langue Bleue:

- ▶ *Grammaire abrégée de la langue bleue* (1900)
- ▶ *Méthode et vocabulaire de la langue bleue, Bolak: langue internationale pratique* (1900)
- ▶ *Premier vocabulaire de la langue bleue Bolak* (1902)
- ▶ *Textes français traduits dans la langue bleue — Bolak — langue internationale pratique* (1902)
- ▶ *Vers la langue internationale* (1902)

The *Grammaire Abrégée* was even translated into English (1900) and into German (1900), and translations were produced in Spanish (1900) as *Gramática abreviada de la Lengua Azul "Bolak", lengua internacional práctica / Léon Bollack ; adaptada para el uso de los españoles y los hispano-americanos* and in Italian, *Grammatica della Lingua Azzurra per il Professor M. Lanzani*. It appears in German as *Kurze Grammatik der Blauen Sprache von A. L. Picard, licencie es-lettres*. Drezen (1991, p.208) mentions a Czech edition, but any bibliographical details of this Czech version cannot be traced if it existed.

These publications represent a tremendous effort and expense. Although they all bore a cover price, there is no evidence that a single one was sold or that Bollack gained a single adherent.

Langue Bleue or Bolak was entering a crowded field, as we have seen, and required a major campaign of promotion if it were to compete with Zamenhof’s creation in particular. Bollack needed to convince the public both of the need for his language and of the soundness of the principles on which it had been created. He wrote, without excess of modesty, “Je crois avoir obtenu un perfectionnement dans la création d’un langage international” (1899:viii). (I think I have achieved perfection in the creation of an international language).

Bollack was resourceful and lacking in financial constraints when it came to propagating his new creation. Firstly, he approached the Société Linguistique de Paris in 1899, but they declared themselves incompetent to make a decision on what the international language

should be (Bulletin de La Société de Linguistique, Séance du 18 Novembre 1899). Because money was not a problem, he sent out a blizzard of his materials to notable and influential figures, beginning in 1899. An article ostensibly about the future evolution of the French language entitled “La Langue Française en l’an 2003”, but in reality about the qualities of a planned language, also caught the attention of H.G. Wells who mentioned it and Bolak in a footnote to his *A Modern Utopia* (1905:14).

Some of the feedback he received appeared in a publication called *Langage Extranational Pratique* in 1904. Detailed reading of those responses reveals the courteous thanks traditional in that age, but many comments can be seen as little more than acknowledgement of receipt. The quotations which follow are the author’s translations from the French.

Pierre Émile Levasseur (1828 – 1911), an eminent French economist, said that “the method suggested has been judged worthy of attention by a certain number of competent people.” Jacques Novicow of Odessa, a writer on sociology, said “The idea of fixing the meaning of a word according to its appearance seems very ingenious to me.”

M. G. Dottin, a Celticist, grammarian, and Professor at the University of Rennes, wrote “I should like to congratulate you on the ingenuity and the simplicity of your system.” Verner von Heidenstam (1859 - 1940), a Swedish poet and novelist, added “I thank you a thousand times for sending your extraordinarily interesting work”

Otto Donner was a professor of Sanskrit and comparative linguistics at the University of Helsinki and founder of the Finno-Ugric Society (a nationalistic organization for studying the languages, ethnology, and history of Finno-Ugric peoples) wrote, “The rigour with which you have undertaken your system seems to me to be its most characteristic feature compared to previous attempts.”

Elib Reclus, an ethnologist in Brussels, wrote “You have persuaded me of the practicability of an international language.”

Bollack went on to cite the opinion of Raoul de la Grasserie, a sociologist who had written in a monograph on the essential principles of an international auxiliary language: “One of the essential principles is not to seek to obtain linguistic perfection.” Curiously Raoul de la Grasserie went on to prepare his own international language called Spokil and presented it in direct competition to Bolak in 1907, as we shall see. Raoul de la Grasserie was also the author of *Apolema / Langue Pacifiste* published in 1907.

One M. J. de Hoon of Ghent, Belgium, opined that “It is incontestable that Bolak has great advantages over all the systems of artificial languages and in particular over Esperanto.”

Dr Moreau, a lecturer in medicine in Algiers, also made a direct comparison with Esperanto: “Today it’s Esperanto which seems to be in vogue. Why? Is it because of its perfection? It seems to me very inferior to the Langue Bleue.”

Bollack gained support too from co-religionist C. T. Strauss of New York. In Chicago in 1893, Strauss became the first U.S. citizen formally to convert to Buddhism in the United States. He was also a pioneer vegetarian. Despite his apparent commitment to Bolak, he transferred his loyalty to Ido and later went on to edit an early Buddhist tract in Ido: *Buddho e sua Doktrino (redaktita da C.T. Strauss)*, (Zürich: Ido-Verlag, 51pp). C. T. Strauss wrote, “I was excited by the question of the international language! More than twenty years ago I received from the author of Volapuk the title of ‘Volapukatidel’ (Teacher of Volapuk); having discovered the errors of that system, I became a partisan of Spelin, for which I published a short grammar in New York, and I have got to know Bolak which has been published since. I consider your method superior to all the others, although it is not completely perfect, but it could be made perfect.”

Greek scholar d'O. Knuth, in Berlin, a former member of the Volapuk academy, wrote: “If you want to know my judgement on your grammatical proposals, I will tell you only this: the projects of Schleyer (Volapuk) and Samenhoff (Esperanto) were fine inventions, but the Blue Language is superior to them in its simplicity and logic. it is only the vocabulary which seems rather defective here and there ...Idiom Neutral, a sort of Volapuk has been sent to me, but I prefer your system. Ex-Volapukists were the most favourable on the whole.

Bollack had clearly selected the most favourable opinions he could, but even here there is some damning with faint praise. Significant by its absence is any commitment to actually learn and use this new tongue.

Bollack had not been well served by his translator into English. *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2145 (Feb. 8, 1902), pp. 346-347 seems to be mocking the unusual, unnatural English of Bollack’s book in its translation by a Professor Tischer. “Strange English! It is indeed obvious to understand that this facility of comprehension between persons of different nationalities will forcibly raise a Holy Communion of thoughts and of pacification among peoples dealing together. Therefore all those who foresee that many causes of dissent may be thus driven away, all those who wish heartily the universal pacification of minds, all those who think of a better future for mankind, cannot do otherwise than sympathize with this purpose of concord. Giving their hearty cooperation to the author, all men animated by these generous thoughts will surely contribute to the universal peace and harmony *ad Majorem humanitatis gloriam*. Forward to the Fraternity, through the international idiom, through the language colour of heavens, through the Blue Language!”

The Delegation for the Adoption of an International Auxiliary Language (French: *Délégation pour l'Adoption d'une Langue Auxiliaire Internationale*) was a body of academics convened in the early part of the twentieth century to decide on the issue of the which international auxiliary language should be chosen for international use. In June 1907, the Delegation convened and refused to decide the ultimate issue, but rather, at the insistence of Louis Couturat, created a committee to make the decision. The inventors of language systems had been invited to attend either in person or by representative to defend their systems. This offer was taken up by Dr. Nicolas (Spokil), Mr. Spitzer (Parla) and Mr. Bollack (La Langue Bleue); moreover Dr. Zamenhof was represented by Mr. de Beaufront, who had been propagating

Esperanto for many years; and almost as representative of Idiom Neutral came Mr. Monseur, professor of comparative philology in Brussels. The ultimate decision of the committee charged by the Delegation was to adopt the Esperanto language, but with certain reforms. The result became a distinct language known as Ido in 1907.

Despite the attention of Wells and money invested by Bollack, the blue language Bolak gained no adherents, and Monsieur Bollack went on to support Ido, according to Otto Jespersen, writing in 1912 in "The History of our Language".

Bollack was not modest about his achievement or in his aims:

“Le vœu ardent de l’auteur est que sa méthode soit choisie pour réaliser le rêve de l’humanité soucieuse de concorde ; et c’est pourquoi il a donné à son oeuvre le nom de la couleur même du firmament” (Bollack, L. 1900. *Grammaire abrégée de la langue bleue*. Paris: Editions de la Langue Bleue). The English version of this appears as: “The fondest wish of the author is that his method may be chosen in order to realize the dream of humanity anxious for concord; and therefore he has given to his work the name of the very colour of the firmament.” It is no tribute to his modesty that he wrote “The simplified name of the author will be the denomination of the Blue Language in the new idiom.”

Bollack had wide social and political interests. He was also concerned to combat chauvinist attitudes in his own country, France, towards Germany, his father’s home country. He published a 64 page pamphlet arguing against the return of Alsace and Lorraine to France – hardly a popular view.

It should also be remembered that he was a member of an international diaspora. His pamphlets, particularly the political ones, on the way the world is organised are the logical, philosophical, and political corollary of creating or advocating an international language. He certainly reflected the times he lived in, by referring to “civilised peoples”.

We know that Bollack’s interests were not limited to the linguistic. We know that he argued the case for a universal currency: “La monnaie internationale” (*La Revue*, June 15, 1911). He produced a booklet on the humane use of feathers: (*L’emploi rationnel de la plume des oiseaux sauvages: Réglementation, oui; prohibition, non..* Publ. du. Comite d’Ornithologie Economique, 1914.). He argued for world federation (*Vers La Fédération Mondiale*) in *Revue "Les Documents Du Progres " - Revue Internationale*. He wrote against war: *Comment tuer la guerre - La loi mondiale de boycottage douanier*. Rapport présenté à la Commission juridique du XIXe Congrès universel de la paix (Genève, septembre 1912) sur les sanctions économiques. He had some daring thoughts such as a five-day work week including a one-day weekend.

We know from shipping records that Bollack went to the United States of America in 1910. Strangely, Zamenhof went to the USA in that very same year. In America Bollack delivered a series of lectures on international conciliation at Leland Stanford Junior University. The printed version of the syllabus of lectures, published by The World Peace Foundation,

Boston, in 1912 lists Bollack among the “leading workers for peace”, alongside David Lloyd-George: Chancellor of the Exchequer, London, and J. Ramsey Macdonald, MP, London.

There are some striking similarities between the contemporaries Zamenhof and Bollack. Both had a plurilingual background. Both were Jews, although it is striking that in none of Bollack's works is his Jewish identity mentioned. Zamenhof was open about his ethnicity, but supporters of the language in France were cautious about it, perhaps because of the sensitivity of the Dreyfus case which had caused great divisions in France.

Clear differences also relate to money. While Bollack had no financial worries at all, Zamenhof faced financial crises on a number of occasions. Indeed, he was only able to print his first booklet in 1887 thanks to the dowry he received when he married Klara Silbernik. Idealism lay behind Zamenhof's language creation. His vision for a better world was explicit in homaranismo, hilelismo and in the language's internal idea. Bollack too had a sense of idealism which was in a more rationalist, less mystical tradition. Zamenhof also spoke of the “internal idea” of Esperanto, of the notion that the ideal of Esperanto contained a set of core beliefs or values.

The views of the two men on poetry were very different. Bollack saw no value at all in poetry in a planned language, whereas Zamenhof used poetic imagery to both shape and convey his view of Esperanto's role.

The greatest difference, perhaps, lay in the characters of the two men. Bollack claimed perfection for his project; Zamenhof did not.