

[From: *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 January 1954.
A letter from Mario Pei in response to editorial of 10 January 1954]

A Word on Languages

To the N. Y. Herald Tribune:

As often as a constructed language, such as Esperanto or Interlingua, is offered for international use, the criticism is voiced that such a language cannot possibly serve as a true linguistic medium, because, not having grown like Topsy, it cannot convey what the critics choose to call the "cultural," or "spiritual," or "esthetic," or "literary" values of the natural languages.

But let a gadget be constructed which shows promise of translating very, very simple sentences of half a dozen words from one language into another, and paeans of praise arise, such as the one voiced in your editorial "Electronic Linguistics." The gadget is compared to Gutenberg's invention of movable type, or the Wrights' invention of the airplane. It will serve to break down existing language barriers! It will bring order into language itself!

Seriously, do you think any

mechanical device, however perfect or perfected, will ever be able to render the tongue of Shakespeare into that of Moliere, that of Goethe into that of Tolstoi, that of Cervantes or Dante into that of Confucius?

On the other hand, if all that is wanted is how to "order a beer in Singapore," or how to say "John loves Mary," why won't a simple constructed language, installed in all the elementary schools of the world, side by side with the national languages, fill the bill? That would really reach all people and break down existing language barriers, on a purely practical plane. It might even show existing languages how to be a little more logical, without destroying any of their real or assumed cultural values.

How mechanistic can we Americans get? How far can we go to save ourselves the trouble of a little language-learning? MARIO A. PEI
—New York, Jan. 13, 1954