

Esperanto

J.C.Wells, University College London

Esperanto is a constructed language intended for international use. Originating as an artificial language, it is unique in having enjoyed a measure of success sufficient for it to have acquired a speech community and even to have undergone a degree of creolization. In consequence, the epithet 'artificial' is arguably no longer applicable to it. Unlike computer languages and codes, Esperanto generally satisfies the criteria for recognition as a form of natural language. However, its proponents' hopes of its being generally adopted for international use have not been realized, and its future must be seen as uncertain.

1. Background

The creator of Esperanto was Ludovic Lazar Zamenhof, a Jewish oculist of Warsaw, who used the pseudonym Doktoro Esperanto, 'the one who hopes'. His *Lingvo internacia* was first published in 1887, in Russian. By the beginning of the twentieth century Esperanto, as the language itself quickly came to be known, had been taken up in France, Germany, and elsewhere; the London Esperanto Club (still in existence) was founded in 1903. The participants at the first international Esperanto congress, held in 1905 in Boulogne-sur-Mer, proclaimed the essential linguistic basis (*Fundamento*) of the language as inviolable. Support has subsequently spread to most parts of the world, including Japan, China, and Brazil (although the movement remains very weak in most of the Third World). Both Stalin and Hitler saw the internationalist and idealist values of Esperanto as presenting a threat, and launched persecutions of its supporters (Lins, 1988). As of 2004, the number of speakers of Esperanto is unknown, but variously estimated at between one or two hundred thousand and several million. Universala Esperanto-Asocio, with headquarters in Rotterdam, has members in over 100 countries. Esperanto speakers in the news recently include 1994 Nobel laureate in economics Reinhard Selten, 1996 World Chess Champion Zsuzsa Polgar, and Tivadar Soros, father of financier George Soros.

The annual World Esperanto Congress — held entirely in Esperanto — regularly attracts participants in the thousands. The attached sound files are of speakers addressing this assembly, in 1964 and 1995 respectively: Ivo Lapenna (1911–1987), professor of international law at the London School of Economics, whose mother tongue was Croatian; and the author of this article, John Wells (1939–), whose mother tongue is English.

It must be emphasized that Esperanto is a real language, spoken and written, successfully used as a means of communication between people who have no other common language. For the great majority of its users, of course, it is a second language, learnt well after the acquisition of the L1, so that levels of competence vary widely. However, there are some speakers, children of parents who use

Esperanto as a family language, for whom it is a native language or mother tongue, normally in a bilingual or trilingual relationship with the language of the local community or other parental language(s). There is no other case in linguistic history of something that started as an intellectual scheme, a project on paper, being transformed into a language with native speakers of the second and indeed the third generation.

The traditional aim of the Esperanto movement is the adoption of Esperanto as L2 for all mankind. The chief arguments for this can be summarized by saying that Esperanto is easy to learn and politically neutral.

Ease of learning is a consequence of the complete regularity of the language: grammatical rules have no exceptions, and the agglutinative morphological structure (section 3 below) makes vocabulary acquisition much faster than for other languages. As a result, it is claimed, Esperanto can be learnt three to ten times as fast as 'national' or 'ethnic' languages (although obviously the rate of progress depends, as always, on many factors, including the learner's L1).

Political neutrality: Esperanto belongs to no particular nation or ethnic group. This, it is claimed, makes it politically a better choice for an international common language than English (seen by many as irredeemably attached to parochial UK or USA values) or other national languages.

Opposition to Esperanto is often more emotional than rational. Serious critics, however, argue first that Esperanto is a language without culture (although supporters of Esperanto would dispute this, pointing to over a hundred years' literary activity, including a substantial body of original poetry); and second, that it is too European (though all alternative solutions to the question of an international language are even more so). In any case, it is claimed, the economic, social, and political pressures in favor of the choice of English for international use are by now overwhelming.

In the light of the perceived success of English in filling the role for which Esperanto was intended, one group (not the majority) within the Esperanto movement have redefined their aims as being those of securing linguistic rights as a 'stateless diaspora linguistic collective'. They see the speakers of Esperanto as being comparable to the speakers of other endangered or minority languages (www.esperantio.net).

2. Pronunciation and orthography

The phoneme system comprises 23 consonants and 5 vowels. The consonants are plosives /p b t d k g/, fricatives /f v s z ʃ ʒ x h/, affricates /ts tʃ dʒ/, nasals /m n/, liquids /l r/ and glides /j w/ (the latter only after a vowel). The vowels are /i, e, a, o, u/. Word stress is always penultimate.

Orthography is strictly phonemic, using the Latin alphabet and including the following letters bearing diacritics: ĉ /tʃ/, ĝ /dʒ/, ĥ /x/, ĵ /ʒ/, ŝ /ʃ/, and ŭ /w/.

An international standard of 'good' pronunciation has by now evolved, and includes the avoidance of marked interference from speakers' L1s. Intonation follows general, mainly European, models, without parochialisms.

3. Morphology and syntax

Esperanto syntax and morphology show strong Slavic influences. Its morphemes are invariant and can be almost indefinitely recombined into different words. The internal word structure has affinity with agglutinative languages in that all words (other than function words) consist of a stem plus a grammatical ending (-o for nouns, -a for adjectives, -i for infinitive verbs, etc.: *telefon-o* 'a telephone', *telefon-a* 'telephonic', *telefon-i* 'to telephone'). The plural ending is -j (*telefonoj* 'telephones'). There is an accusative case -n, used for the the direct object. Adjectives agree with nouns in number and case: *mi vidis grandan hundon* 'I saw a big dog', *du grandaj hundoj atakis min* 'two big dogs attacked me'. There are three verb tenses, -as present, -is past, -os future, plus -us conditional and -u imperative/volitive. The definite article, invariant, is la; there is no indefinite article. The grammar is entirely regular and without exceptions.

The normal word order is SVO. Determiners and adjectives usually precede nouns, and the language is prepositional. However, the morphological marking of the accusative means that the order of constituents is flexible and can be rather freely scrambled. The last sentence quoted has emphatic or stylistic variants such as *atakis min du hundoj grandaj*.

The stem of a word may be a single root (base morpheme) or a combination of roots and/or affixes: for example, *parol-ant-o* speak-pres.ppl-NOUN 'speaker', *parol-em-a* speak-tending-ADJ 'talkative', *mar-bord-o* sea-edge-NOUN 'seaside'. Each morpheme (root, affix, ending) is in principle unvarying in form and meaning; the meaning of a compound or affixed form is the sum of the meanings of its constituent elements. A twentieth-century development is the increasing use of affixes as independent stems, for example *em-o* 'inclination'.

4. Vocabulary

The lexical material was chosen by Zamenhof to be as international as possible. Some three-fourths of the basic roots are of Romance origin, the remainder mostly Germanic or Slavic; often they are common to several source families (e.g. *dom-* 'house'). Classical and international roots are readily incorporated, though adapted to Esperanto phonology and morphology: thus since *teatr-o* is 'theater', 'theatrical' must be *teatr-a*. Given *telefon-o* 'telephone', *telefone* is automatically the adverb 'by telephone' and *telefoni* the verb 'to telephone'. The extensive use of affixes means that the vocabulary is highly structured and comparatively easy to learn. From *vidi* 'to see', dozens of derivatives such as *videbla* 'visible', *videbligi* 'to render visible', *nevidebleco* 'invisibility' can be regularly and predictably formed.

5. General

The language is monitored by an Academy (Akademio de Esperanto, www.akademio-de-esperanto.org). This does not however inhibit individual speakers from constant linguistic creativity. Many Esperanto speakers enjoy debating linguistic issues and arguing about vocabulary innovations. It is only recently that computing terminology has settled down, with *komputilo* (regularly formed by the suffix *-il-* 'instrument', cf. *hakilo* 'ax') as the term for 'computer' and technical expressions such as *elŝuti* 'to download'. Popular spoken Esperanto occasionally deviates from the written norm. For example, although the official form of the word for 'tax' is *imposto*, and this is the only form given in dictionaries, in spoken Esperanto the form *impoŝto* can be heard from time to time (because of contamination from *poŝto* 'post, mail'). The standard and written word for 'plastic' is *plasta*, but in conversation *plastika* is also to be heard. The existence of such 'incorrect' spoken forms can be interpreted as an indication that the language is truly socially embedded ('living').

With a speech community scattered around the world, but nevertheless commanding great feelings of loyalty from its speakers, Esperanto is indeed comparable in some ways to 'diaspora' languages such as Romani, Yiddish, or Armenian. In its lack of official government status it is like creoles and many ethnic minority languages. It remains to be seen whether in the last analysis it is a linguistic curiosity doomed to disappear, or a brilliant idea whose moment has not yet come.

Bibliography

- [Fettes, M.] (2002). *An update on Esperanto*. On the web at http://www.uea.org/info/angle/an_ghisdatigo.html.
- Forster, P.G. (1982). *The Esperanto movement*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Janton, P. (1993). Esperanto. In: Tonkin, H. (ed.), *Language, literature, and community*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.
- Lindstedt, J. (1995). *Esperanto kiel denaska kaj familia lingvo* [Esperanto as a native and family language]. Website: www.helsinki.fi/~jslindst/denask-l.html
- Lins, U. (1988). *La danĝera lingvo*. Gerlingen: Bleicher.
- Pokrovskij, S. (2003). *Komputada leksikono* [Computing lexicon]. On the web at <http://www.iis.nsk.su/persons/pok/Eo/KompLeks/html/DEFAULT.html>.
- Tonkin, H. (1977). *Esperanto and international language problems: a research bibliography*. Washington DC: Esperantic Studies Foundation.
- Tonkin, H. and Fettes, M. (1996). 'Esperanto studies: an overview'. In *Esperanto documents* 43. Rotterdam: Universal Esperanto Association.
- Wells, J.C. (1969). *Teach Yourself concise Esperanto and English dictionary*. London: English Universities Press.
- Wells, J.C. (1978). *Lingvistikaj aspektoj de Esperanto* [Linguistic aspects of Esperanto]. Rotterdam: Universala Esperanto-Asocio.
- Wennergren, B. (2003). *Plena manlibro de Esperanta gramatiko* [Complete manual of Esperanto grammar]. On the web <http://www.bertilow.com/pmeg>.

Useful web sites (as at August 2004)

www.uea.org
www.akademio-de-esperanto.org
www.esperantoeducation.com/culture.html
www.esperanto-usa.org
www.esperanto-gb.org
gxangalo.com

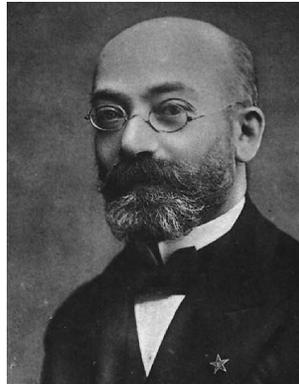
Sound files

[These two sound files (mp3) can be accessed via the website
<http://www.esperantoeducation.com/culture.html>
where they are to be found under the heading CD 3.

From the CD *Prezidantoj de UEA*, in the series *Tiel sonis...* no. 3, Biblioteko Hector Hodler. Rotterdam: Universala Esperanto-Asocio (published 2004):

1. 'Ivo Lapenna', 1964
2. 'John Wells', 1995

The CD from which these short excerpts are taken (its title means 'This is what presidents of UEA sounded like') contains eight recordings of presidential addresses at world Esperanto congresses, delivered between 1927 and 1995. The author can certify that the second extract, at least, was delivered impromptu, from prepared notes but without a full script.



L.L. Zamenhof

(a widely circulated photo: copyright unknown)



People talking Esperanto
(taken from <http://www.esperanto-jongeren.nl/esperanto.php>)

ABSTRACT

Esperanto is a constructed language intended for international use. Originating as an artificial language, it has acquired a speech community and even native speakers. Thus it is no longer exactly 'artificial', but must be recognized as a form of natural language. However, its proponents' hopes of its being generally adopted for international use have not been realized, and its future must be seen as uncertain.

Its linguistic structure is regular and without exceptions. The extensive use of affixes makes the vocabulary comparatively easy to learn.

CROSS-REFERENCES

Languages of wider communication, Lingua francas as second languages, Standardization, Controlled Languages, Language policies/policies on language in Europe, Language and discrimination, Language Planning & Policy, Models of, Linguistic imperialism

KEYWORDS

Esperanto, artificial languages, constructed languages, universal languages, Zamenhof, diaspora, creolization, regularity