

Esperanto? What is that?

Esperanto was proposed in 1887 as a neutral international language by Dr. L. L. Zamenhof, a Jewish ophthalmologist living in the (now Polish) western part of the Russian Empire. His aim was to develop an easily accessible, regular language and try it out with colleagues, so that it might eventually be introduced as an international second language for everybody. Zamenhof considered a neutral language, one that would belong to all equally, to be not only a practical matter, but a way to resolve conflicts and promote peace as well.



Esperanto has achieved *one* initial breakthrough: it has become a living language that spans generations and which tens of thousands throughout

the world know. Some of them have joined organised groups. The Universal Esperanto Association (UEA = *Universala Esperanto-Asocio*) has members in 114 countries. The smaller World Anational Association (SAT = *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda*) has around 1000 members. It is a meeting-place for left-wing (mainly socialist, anarchist and antinationalist), trade-unionist and ecologically active Esperanto speakers. Esperanto continuously demonstrates its viability. It provides many practical services to its speakers.

Democratic Communication on a World Scale

The world dominance of just a few languages derives primarily from the power of the states that use them. Members of non-privileged linguistic communities communicate "uphill" internationally – to the extent they have a command of one or more hegemonic languages. Those that don't know any "major" language are for the most part excluded from international communication.

International use of just a few national languages distorts cultural exchanges and skews the flow of information in favour of the economic, political and opinion-making elites in the linguistically privileged countries. An easier-to-learn and neutral language could create more equity and balance.

Some people are fatalistic about the language problem and some profit from it, because their personal command of foreign languages is a career asset or a source of prestige. But it is especially the ruling classes of many countries that have every reason to maintain the status quo. It is very much in their interest that the working masses and generally most of society remain monolingual or have only limited proficiency in foreign languages, because that way they have less direct access to opinions and information from abroad that haven't passed through the filter of the domestic mass media that are dominated by those ruling classes, just as they have less direct exchange with their social counterparts in foreign countries. "Globalisation from below", a concept frequently

brought up lately and a response to relentless capitalist globalisation from above, can only be put into practice by people who can talk to each other.

Esperanto is egalitarian. It was meant to enable broad strata of society in all countries to communicate directly – over and beyond linguistic and political boundaries. English, thought by many to be *the* de facto world language, fails to do this job even in the small group of comparatively wealthy nations with developed systems of public education. Even though power is and will remain for the time being in the hands of those naturally hostile to the general introduction of Esperanto, practical experience shows that Esperanto even today enables some of the linguistically disadvantaged to become bilingual, and that it is a means by which all can engage in equitable communication across language boundaries.

Further Information:

Workers' Esperanto Movement of Great Britain (SATEB):

<http://www.geocities.com/satebejo/index.html>

e-mail: arturo@signalprent.demon.co.uk

World Anational Association (SAT):

<http://satesperanto.free.fr/>

Multilingual Esperanto Information Centre:

<http://www.esperanto.net/>

Lernu (instructional material):

<http://www.lernu.net/>

A Functioning Language

Esperanto can be learned in around a third of the time needed to learn the most commonly studied foreign languages. It is written phonemically (one sound = one letter) and has a very regular grammar. Its phonology is as international as possible. Spoken Esperanto sounds a little like Spanish or Italian.

Esperanto is an agglutinating language, in which a large amount of vocabulary is compounded from smaller elements. This reduces the number of lexical elements that need to be learned separately. Items of vocabulary were selected in accordance with the principle of maximum international familiarity.

A language suited to all purposes can only develop in a collective process. For almost 100 years congresses and informal meetings have

been held, at which Esperanto is spoken. There are tens of thousands of books and several hundred regularly published, albeit often small periodicals in Esperanto. Esperanto frequently becomes the everyday family language for couples of different origin (and their children).

Esperanto evolves just as other languages do – by borrowing lexical items and forging new vocabulary from its own resources, yet it does not lose its relative simplicity and regularity.



Where Is Esperanto Going?

The community of speakers in Europe is stable, while it has grown substantially over the last few decades in some areas outside of Europe (China, Iran, Africa). Esperanto has received a greater measure of official recognition than is commonly known, though not nearly enough to have it introduced throughout the world as a universally used second language. In 1954 a UNESCO resolution acknowledged "the results attained by Esperanto in the field of international intellectual relations and in the rapprochement of the peoples of the world". The Universal Esperanto Association collaborates with other non-governmental organisations in a number of UNESCO working groups. That organisation even recommended in 1985 that the language problem and Esperanto be given more attention in schools and universities of the member-states.

In some countries Esperanto is allowed as an elective subject in schools. The University of Budapest has an Esperanto department, and other universities offer courses in and about Esperanto. Local authorities in a few countries

publish tourist and other information in Esperanto, while international broadcasting services in several countries broadcast daily or weekly Esperanto programs on short-wave and by satellite.

The increasingly dense network of world communication, along with capitalist globalisation, are creating an increasing challenge to the working class as time goes on – the challenge of deliberately fomenting globalisation from below. Esperanto is well-suited to providing people initial – and extendable – proficiency in a foreign language. Its community of users constitutes a milieu, in which questions relating to language politics are constantly reflected. In these ways Esperanto makes its contribution toward the necessary improvement of the linguistic culture of underprivileged strata of society. Regardless of the uncertainty of Esperanto ever being pushed through politically, as a language it has for many decades proved viable and capable of continuously attracting new users.

Many Put Esperanto to Practical Use

Many have made world-wide contacts through Esperanto in return for a modest investment of time to learn it. Some become active in organisations. Most Esperanto-speakers emphasise the practical aspects more than the political: they use their language skills on vacation trips, by contacting acquaintances or making new contacts through one of the address books such as the popular *Pasporta Servo*,

which contains the addresses of 1364 people in 89 countries who are willing to lodge travelling or vacationing Esperanto-speakers for a limited time. There are dozens of international meetings, conferences and recreational activities the year round, often dealing with social, political and cultural questions of current interest.

[V.i.S.d.P.: Gary Mickle]