INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF ESPERANTO

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ABSTRACT

After almost one hundred years of continuous use, Esperanto has achieved the status and character of a fully-fledged language, functioning much as any other language does. Research on Esperanto is hampered because knowledge of the subject is often regarded, ipso facto, as evidence of a lack of objectivity, and also because Esperanto, as largely an L2, is elusive, and its speakers hard to quantify. The problem is compounded by the rapid shift in its community from membership-based organizations to decentralized, informal web-based communication. Also shifting are the community's ideological underpinnings: it began as a response to lack of communication across languages but is now often perceived by its users as an alternative, more equitable means of communication than the increasingly ubiquitous English. Underlying these changes is a flourishing cultural base, including an extensive literature and periodical press. There is a need for more research – linguistic, sociolinguistic, and in the history of ideas. In intellectual history, Esperanto and related ideas have played a larger role than is generally recognized, intersecting with, and influencing, such movements as modernization in Japan, the development of international organizations, socialism in many parts of the world, and, in our own day, machine translation.

KEY WORDS

Esperanto, Esperanto community, interlinguistic research, language ideology

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INTRODUCTION

In an influential essay some years ago, the late Richard Wood described Esperanto as "a voluntary, non-ethnic, non-territorial speech community" [1]. Wood stressed the fact that Esperanto is largely an elective language, learned by its speakers through conscious decision, rather than acquired as a first language, and he emphasized that the speaking of Esperanto is in large part not determined by geographical location or ethnic background. As a language created to serve as a bridge between languages – a lingua franca intended not to replace but to supplement other languages – Esperanto occupies an unusual, not to say uneasy, place in linguistics. Is it a *real* language? Is it fully expressive? Is it a utopian idea unworthy of our attention? These are the kinds of questions that scholars of Esperanto have not infrequently to contend with. They often find themselves explaining that, with almost 130 years of use behind it and, over the years, incontestably millions of users, it constitutes a linguistic phenomenon that cannot be explained away, even if it seems to violate some of the conventional definitions of language. Perhaps fortunately, we are today questioning some of those conventional definitions in other ways as well, not least in our relatively new-found interest in the study of language, and language communities, as complex adaptive systems; and the study of Esperanto as a *phenomenon* rather than as an *enthusiasm* seems increasingly possible within the realms of general linguistics and sociolinguistics [2-4].

Those scholars who study the language often find themselves caught in a variation of the anthropologist's dilemma, or the double-bind: if they have learned this *voluntary* language, they must have lost their objectivity, say the critics, and are therefore disqualified from commenting on it; if they have not learned the language, they lack adequate information to pronounce on it … and are therefore disqualified [5]. The lack of prestige associated with Esperanto is a significant stumbling-block. This author knows of more than one promising study abandoned because of colleagues' scepticism about the value of Esperanto and strong advice to avoid it. Two truths emerge: first, to be acquainted with something is not in itself evidence of bias; second, to study a phenomenon that lacks value is not in itself a guarantee that the research will lack value. To these truths we might add a third: there are plenty of ways of studying a phenomenon objectively even if one is ideologically committed to that phenomenon. A study of the grammar of Esperanto does not require lack of commitment to Esperanto; a study of the Esperanto community need not show bias just because the researcher is a member of that community.

COMMUNITY

These problems are made doubly difficult by Esperanto's sheer elusiveness.: it exists, wraith-like, in the interstices of language, with no geographical location, no L1 users to speak of, little continuity from generation to generation, and no ethnic identification; it seldom appears in institutional settings or official pronouncements.

Efforts to count its speakers have had little success. Two essays in the present collection, those of Puškar and Wandel, attempt, in their various ways, to pin it down – one (Puškar), based on the conventional model of membership-based organizations, implies that its numbers are actually declining; the other (Wandel), extrapolating from self-reporting in social media, suggests that they are rising. Both methodologies have significant limitations, but even the best of methodologies will not solve the problem. Speakers of languages are notoriously difficult to count [6]: statistics may be based on self-reported census data, or on school enrolments, or on the assumption that in a given geographical area – say Sussex, or Iowa, or New South Wales – everyone speaks the local language, except for those who

identifiably do not. But however precise these methods, or a combination of these methods, might be, they founder on one fundamental question: How much language must someone have in order to be recognized as a speaker of that language? For Esperanto and its worldwide community there are no censuses, no school systems; there is no geography. And as a *second* language for virtually all its speakers, it is spoken imperfectly by many, less imperfectly by a few.

The issue is made even more complicated by the demise of the membership-based organization. It used to be that the active Esperantist had to join an organization to link up with Esperantists in other countries, or to gain access to its books and periodicals, which were distributed mostly through these organizations. Today, however, it is enough to hop on the internet to connect with the world; the old, paper-based, geographically limited organizations are less and less essential. Furthermore, dependent on the consent of their members, they are insufficiently agile to deal with the demands of the electronic age. The language-learning and social media site *lernu.net* has over ten times as many members as the largest conventional organization, the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA); the Facebook group Esperanto, still only two years old, has also surpassed the UEA in the number of its members, which continues to increase. While the members of UEA are easy to count, the numbers in these electronic domains barely stand still for long enough to be counted.

Indeed, the fluidity of the Esperanto speech community is one of its primary characteristics: members move into it and out of it at various times in their lives, much as speakers of second or third languages often use those languages to a greater or lesser extent as their lives change. Nor are their views of the language consistent. Conventionally, speakers of Esperanto make a distinction between *finvenkismo* – dissatisfaction with present levels of dissemination and advocacy of greater use of the language, particularly in official contexts – and *raŭmismo* (named after the Finnish city of Rauma where this view was codified during a youth conference), which maintains that Esperanto has already reached a level of self-sufficiency and viability in which its users can enjoy its cultural products, communicate with one another for their own self-realisation, and thus take on the role of an international linguistic minority. As with many other dichotomies of this kind, this is a false dichotomy, since most Esperantists probably occupy a position somewhere in the middle – a position that varies over time. Tired of battling a sceptical public, they may retreat into their own linguistic shells for a while, enjoying this worldwide culture for its own sake, but then re-emerging to argue the case for the language. This is one of the areas where sociological research is needed: we do not know enough about the language attitudes of Esperantists, nor about fluctuations in those attitudes.

IDEOLOGY

Behind this lack of clarity lies a larger question. If Esperanto *is* a language (and it surely is), is it *just* a language, or does it carry with it a particular ideology? In truth, the language has been used for every ideological purpose, from official Maoist pronouncements by the old-style Chinese government in the early days of the Chinese revolution to reports by the German High Command in World War I, and from anarchist sympathies in Japan a century ago to favourable commentary in a recent issue of the *Wall Street Journal.* Languages can certainly be seen as conveyors of ideology, but as any student of language attitudes (to say nothing of students of language rights) can attest, the relationship between language and identity is not linguistic but psychological, and not absolute but contingent. Studies of Esperanto speakers and organizations in the past [7-9] have revealed a left-of-centre bias hardly surprising given the internationalist origins of the language and its function as a bridge between languages and cultures; but learning the language carries with it no ideological requirement, no attitudinal prerequisites.

We might also ask what the person who has learned Esperanto actually joins. Is it a *movement* (which suggests the activist *finvenkismo* mentioned above) or a *community* (which implies self-sufficiency)? The topic is a source of endless debate in Esperanto-speaking circles. Less in question, however, are the tangible manifestations of this movement or community, among them a published literature to which hundreds, if not thousands, of writers have contributed over the years [10-12]; a network of national and international organizations, some based on geography, some on professional or social interests (and *all* currently reconstituting and decentralising themselves in new ways as a result of the electronic revolution); an extensive periodical press [13]; cultural institutions, such as study centres in many locations, specialised libraries; international meetings and gatherings. The sheer multiplicity of these institutions suggests a self-sufficient language community unlikely to be extinguished over anxiety about Esperanto's larger purpose in world affairs, and accordingly an enduring laboratory for those interested in such topics as language change, communicative competence, and a host of related issues.

LANGUAGE RIVALRY

However, Esperanto's larger purpose is increasingly open to question. The retreat of the bigger European, or European-based, languages (French, Italian, German) – a product of the vicissitudes of two world wars and new economic arrangements that have weakened the connection between language and nation in a largely borderless European Union – has allowed the expansion of English as the language of science and business; or, to put it another way, the sheer power of English has necessitated this European retreat [14]. Either way, the process, like so many other economic processes, is self-reinforcing: as educational institutions on the American model expand, and as more and more players join the international market, English offers itself as the commodity in the world language system most worthy of investment [15], and particularly as the language of globalisation.

Zamenhof introduced Esperanto in the late nineteenth century as a means to promote understanding where understanding was lacking; his broader target was the world, his immediate concern the scourge of Russian anti-Semitism [16-20]. Until the end of World War II, and even beyond, it was possible to argue that Esperanto could bridge stubborn language difficulties. Such a development would be practical as well as equitable. It was this belief that stimulated interest in its use in the League of Nations (and, later, the United Nations) [21-23], in schools across the world, and, on the left, as a means of linking the worldwide proletariat.

As long as there was relatively equal competition among the world's leading languages, Esperanto offered itself as a compromise; as that competition became unequal, for example with the drastic undermining of the status of French at the Versailles Conference in 1919 (where David Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson insisted on the use of English), the compromising of German as a language of science during the Hitler regime [24], and, more recently, the regional decline of Russian, the option of adopting an underfunded international auxiliary language like Esperanto has become increasingly unrealistic.

Thus, what was once perhaps both equitable and practical – the adoption of Esperanto for international communication – has become merely equitable: the spirit of Esperanto imbues and coincides with the struggles for language rights, promotes hybridity and bilingualism by protecting against a one-size-fits-all approach to language difference, and offers an *alternative* means of communication, side by side with the less equitable, but increasingly practical, required mastery of English.

We should not, however, ignore those whose entirely rational approach to the problem points to other solutions than globalized English. François Grin, addressing the pay-off in foreign-

language teaching, finds that emphasis on Esperanto makes economic sense [25]; Philippe Van Parijs, while accepting the inevitability of English, argues for the application of distributive justice to balance the costs of such a solution [26]; Ralph Harry proposes an altogether simpler way of handling the language services of international organizations by the staged application of Esperanto [27]. Perhaps we should resist the assumption that the "language problem" is already solved, and that a melding of the world's cultures has no negative implications – in short, it may be that ultimately equity trumps practicality.

ESPERANTO IN SCHOOLS

Much of the ideology of equity promotes advocacy of Esperanto teaching in the schools: learning the language, it is asserted, enhances respect for other languages and cultures, opens the learner not to one country or language, but to many, and paves the way for the acquisition of other languages. It is hard, if not impossible, to prove such educational assertions incontrovertibly, since creating control groups whose enthusiasm is matched by those advocating the learning of Esperanto is difficult; but, as Duncan Charters' article in the present collection makes clear, there is plenty of evidence to show that students learning Esperanto prosper both in Esperanto and in other ways [28-30]. Yet the argument is difficult not because of its plausibility or lack of plausibility, but because of the competing interests of education systems geared to crude measures of economic development and international competition, or, in some cases, because of the politicisation of the educational system. One would not look to the United States, for example, where political pressure groups of all kinds tend to compromise educational planning, for rational approaches to bilingualism or even foreign language education [31]. If efforts to introduce Esperanto into the schools have not borne fruit today (indeed, there appear to be fewer formal classes in Esperanto in the schools across the world than there used to be), the reason is only partially due to the insufficiency of research: its main cause is shifting educational priorities, coupled with simple lack of knowledge of the alternatives, or perhaps in some cases prejudice against Esperanto on the part of language teachers eager to preserve their own shrinking territory or doubts about its relevance by those teaching English.

RESEARCH ON ESPERANTO

The lack of knowledge, for many of the reasons already mentioned, extends to the phenomenon of Esperanto itself. It is here that the question of research enters the picture. There is an acute need for more research (and more support for it [32]), and for overcoming any bias against that research generated by misunderstanding of the difference between knowledge and advocacy with which I began this essay. Jansen's investigation, in this collection, of the grammar of Esperanto, bolstered by the existence of the chair in Esperanto and interlinguistics at the University of Amsterdam now occupied by Federico Gobbo, another contributor to this collection, is an example of the exploration of the *linguistic* system of Esperanto – an objective study of an objective phenomenon. The same can be said of Fiedler's or Melnikov's research on Esperanto phraseology and colloquialism [33-35], or Koutny's on Esperanto as a complex system. Konishi's work on the history of Esperanto in Japan is likewise an attempt to identify a strain in Japanese thought *objectively,* not in the role of an advocate.

As already mentioned, a glaring gap in the field is sociolinguistic research: on the linguistic side, we know little about conversational Esperanto or about its change over time; we know little about pragmatics, or about those aspects of usage that are not prescribed by grammars and dictionaries but created on the spot through informal interaction among speakers, including word play. Relatively little is known about linguistic interference (surely an obvious topic for the researcher), code-switching or –mixing, or conversational gambits. Above all, we know little about the people who actually make up the language community.

Given Wood's reminder that Esperanto is an elective language, we might note the likelihood that, compared with other language communities, the Esperanto population is highly educated, mobile, internationally connected, and politically engaged. To my knowledge, we have no studies that can be said to have *proved* the point, but it may well be that a relatively small population has created an imposing structure of intellectual inquiry (evidenced by a profusion of international gatherings, a lively periodical press, and an increasingly lively web presence) and of cultural engagement (Esperanto literature is varied, productive, and often of high quality).

Paradoxically, a large part of the problem of research springs from the fact that many of the research findings are written in Esperanto and therefore only accessible to the researcher willing to learn the language. The dimensions of this problem are apparent from surveys of research such as Blanke provides in the collection – surveys which include scholarly work *within* Esperanto. Blanke is right to warn about reinventing the wheel. The Esperanto community, understandably, is accommodating of research into Esperanto; the external community less so. Thus, work that might be conducted in other languages is apt to get published in Esperanto for want of a home in more mainstream publications. Perhaps the biggest challenge to Esperanto research is precisely the double bind to which I have already referred: the more research that is generated in Esperanto, the more we know – but the more the researcher with limited knowledge of the language itself is disqualified from pronouncing on it. For the student of linguistics or sociology who is willing to learn the language, a more or less open field is available in the Esperanto movement and community.

ESPERANTO LITERATURE

We have so far paid little attention to those aspects of Esperanto, in addition to the language itself, that are largely invisible outside the community. Perhaps the most important is its literature, both original [11] and translated. Translation has traditionally played a key role in the development of Esperanto, not least because it forces the language to confront the description of phenomena hitherto not encountered in the normal give-and-take of ordinary communication, while at the same time serving as a means of acquainting readers of Esperanto with literary works from across the world [36]. Original literature – poetry, the novel, the short story, drama – also brings into play new experiences requiring linguistic description [37]. The unique flexibility of Esperanto, and, paradoxically, the lack of a constraining literary tradition extending several centuries into the past, provides writers with a remarkable freedom and has produced poetry and prose of considerable accomplishment. Unfortunately, precisely because of these qualities of flexibility and freshness, which actually facilitate translation *into* Esperanto, it is very difficult to translate out of Esperanto into other languages. There is very little good translation from Esperanto into, say, English. Compounding the problem is the fact that publishing in other languages tends to follow linguistic and national boundaries. Few national-language publishers are interested in producing work in a language that is spoken in far-flung corners of the world; thus the realm of Esperanto literature is one of small, often under-financed, publishers specializing in Esperanto and distributing their products largely through small mail-order booksellers. The arrival of web-based sales may change this relative isolation, but today it remains a factor in an environment in which sales of 500 copies of a given work constitute a bestseller.

ESPERANTO IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

However, lest we assume that in this sense Esperanto is peripheral to intellectual history, locked in its own cultural and ideological territory and isolated from larger intellectual movements, we should note a related yet opposite phenomenon – the extent to which Esperanto in fact intersects with other social and intellectual movements and forms a

significant part of intellectual history. The publication of Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language* in the 1990s [38] opened up one such connection by pointing out that linguistic utopianism and the urge to invent languages (Zamenhof's is only the most successful among many[39, 40]) is an element in a much wider human desire – the desire to increase the expressiveness of language, to bring linguistic medium and message closer together. Bacon, Descartes, and Newton shared this goal in their attention to scientific language and the language of logic [41]. They, with their so-called philosophical languages – *a priori* attempts to create total systems of meaning – and later projectors of languages based on existing tongues (so-called *a posteriori* schemes) are the objects of study in the sub-field of linguistics known as interlinguistics (the term was created by the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen).

In a different but related medium, also alluded to by Eco, we may see the language of poetry as evidence of the poet's skill in using language better than others, or alternatively as evidence of the poet's struggle to bend an inadequate linguistic medium to his or her purposes (Is language a subtle medium that only poets can master, or a blunt instrument that they force to do their will?). When Zamenhof created Esperanto, he chose to write poetry in it, and to use it for translation: his first major accomplishment was *Hamlet,* the culmination of his translating work the entire Old Testament. The poetry, and indeed Zamenhof's work in general, makes it clear that he saw his language not simply as a neutral linguistic medium, but as a conveyor of understanding where previously there was no means for such understanding, and above all as a conveyor of humane values. Only in recent years is this extraordinary story receiving the attention from biographers that it deserves, and the intersection of Zamenhof's ideas not only with the impulses described by Eco is being examined, but also their intersection with the intellectual currents of East European Jewry and the Jewish Enlightenment [16, 17, 19, 42]. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the driving force behind the creation of Modern Hebrew, was influenced by many of the same forces – in the same region of Europe at the same time – as Zamenhof [43]: one sought to move his people's linguistic tradition toward the creation of a Jewish homeland; the other sought to take elements from that tradition and reshape the entire world.

Zamenhof embarked on his project at a time of optimism in science and technology – a time of the invention of the telephone, the expansion of telegraphy, the shift from the horse to the internal combustion engine [44, 45]. Zamenhof's creation of Esperanto was part and parcel of the movement that created the utopianism of Edward Bellamy and Henry George (and Karl Marx), of the emergence of international organizations like the Red Cross and the Universal Postal Union, of international expositions and the expansion of world trade, of growing scientific cooperation and the pursuit of the possibility of an international auxiliary language as the language of science [46]. It was a time when the intractable problems of the past and present seemed, at least for a moment, tractable. Thus Esperanto was also a response to the growing shadow of anti-Semitism, the disquieting rise of nationalism, and the human exploitation that accompanied it, both at home and in far-flung empires.

When, a few years later, the pace of scientific and technological discovery led not to utopia but to a world war, the Esperantists made use of their unique international network to reunite families across warring states, and to promote international communication at a time when governments were dead set against it. Young men imprisoned in Britain as conscientious objectors studied Esperanto; others learned it in the trenches on the western and eastern fronts. When the war was over, Esperanto played significant roles in the proletarian revolution in the east [47], in the Spanish civil war [48, 49], and in numerous other social movements – and, with a ghastly inevitability, Esperantists were duly persecuted by both Hitler and Stalin for their audacious interest in socialism (Hitler) and cosmopolitanism (Stalin) [21].

Nor were these developments limited to the western world. Sho Konishi, in the present collection, demonstrates the role of Esperanto in the work of anarchist modernisers in Japan; other scholars have shown how Esperanto influenced the Romanisation effort in China in the 1920s and animated Chinese resistance to the Japanese invasion in the 1930s [50-53].

Konishi's work, here and elsewhere, points to the link between intellectual developments and literary history [54]. There is hardly a literature in the world that has not been influenced in some way by Esperanto: there are references to Esperanto in James Joyce's work; Orwell's Newspeak borrows not only from Basic English but also from Esperanto; Tolkien dabbled in Esperanto as well as Elvish; Jules Verne was fascinated by Esperanto; it influenced the work of the Hungarian Karinthy – and so on [55, 56].

The language also intersected with the emerging field of linguistics. Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, founder of the Kazan school and precursor of the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, was a convinced enthusiast for Esperanto, and Saussure's younger brother René was active in Esperanto circles and wrote on Esperanto linguistics [57]. Later, as Wera and Detlev Blanke explain in the present collection, Eugen Wüster, father of terminology science, used Esperanto as a model in his efforts to standardize the development of scientific and technical vocabulary. His was only one of a number of connections between planned language and language planning, which I address elsewhere in this collection.

Closer to our own time, Gobbo has pointed out, also in the present collection, the link between Esperanto and the development of machine translation. While often these revelations have been slow in coming, they leave one with the clear impression that, far from being isolated or lacking in influence, Esperanto played a role in numerous social and intellectual movements throughout its history.

Thus Esperanto, little known though it may be (and despite efforts to make it better known [58-61]), has much to offer the researcher, if the researcher (such is the irony…) can cross the language barrier separating Esperanto from consideration by outsiders, and if this researcher has the tools to discover its many influences.

Defining the nature of this "voluntary, non-ethnic, non-territorial" community (we note that Wood describes Esperanto by what it is not) is perhaps the biggest and most fundamental challenge. Most generalizations about Esperanto fail to address the sheer heterogeneity of the speech community, the eclectic nature of its language, and the extent of its footprint. As Esperantists sometimes point out, there can be no doubt about its success as a means of linguistic expression [62], even if it has not (yet?) succeeded as a broadly accepted means of international communication.

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