

DOES ESPERANTO REALLY HAVE A CHANCE TO BECOME AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE?

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A. Einstein said: "For international communication international understanding helped by an international language is not only necessary but self-evident. Esperanto is the best solution for the idea of an international language" [2, p.16].

In order to find a common language for everybody to learn, speak and write easily, many artificial languages were evolved but only Esperanto survived as a regular practicing universal language because of its conservatism and creativity [6]. This language would not be associated with any nation or region, overcoming the reluctance of people to learning another language. Besides being a means of communication a language is also the expression of one's national identity [1, p.3].

Esperanto was developed during the period 1877–1885 by L.L. Zamenhof of Warsaw, Poland (then Russia). Zamenhof, who grew up in a polyglot society, was convinced that a common language would be necessary to resolve many of the problems that lead to conflict. He rejected the major languages of his day (French, German, English, Russian) because they were difficult to learn and would put their native speakers at an advantage in discussion with respect to those who did not speak them natively; and he rejected the two "dead" languages with which he was familiar, Latin and Greek, because they were even more complicated and unwieldy than the currently extant major languages. He began work on his planned language, which he would eventually call "LingvoInternacia", as a junior in high school, and eventually published the first textbook of the language (for speakers of Russian) «Esperanto» that means "a person who is hoping" in 1887 [5].

Esperanto is used in about 100 countries all over the world but the most widely in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the former satellite nations of the old Soviet Union, and in East Asia, particularly mainland China [5].

Some speakers of Esperanto have become so enthusiastic about the language that they have chosen to use it at home, even when they share a common native language, and so their children learn the language as their native tongue. And even more important factor is the number of international marriages that have developed between people who have met each other through Esperanto and whose only common language is Esperanto. The result is that today at least several hundreds and perhaps a few thousands individuals throughout the world speak Esperanto as a native language. There are annual conferences, at least one international magazine, and one on-line mailing list devoted to such individuals [5].

Jouko Lindstedt, an expert on native-born Esperanto speakers, showed the overall proportions of language capabilities within the Esperanto community: 1.000 has Esperanto as their native language, 10.000 speak it fluently, 100.000 can use it actively, 1.000.000 understands a large amount passively, and 10.000.000 has studied it to some extent at some time [4].

It is interesting that Esperanto is still several times easier to learn than any European language (five times as easy to learn as Spanish, ten times as easy as Russian, and "considerably" easier than Chinese, Japanese or Arabic) because the grammar is very simple and completely regular. No exceptions to the rules. The spelling and pronunciation are completely regular. It sounds similar to Italian or Spanish. It has a lot of vowels, which makes it pleasant-sounding. English, e. g. has a very large vocabulary, allowing you to pick a word that has exactly the right shade of meaning. English has something like 500,000 words! Esperanto uses a much smaller set of words. The average person's vocabulary is closer to 10,000 or 20,000 words [2, p. 2].

A lot of the vocabulary is related to English, French, German and other Romance and Slavic languages, so that's easier too. Plus the affixes vastly expand the vocabulary so you don't have to memorize millions of new words. You can go on for quite a while about this [2, p. 2]. Leo Tolstoy, e. g. learnt Esperanto in about four hours. But to master it, one requires at least a year or so [6].

Esperanto's designed for international use — not necessarily for intranational use. It's used to build bridges between isolated language groups. Because of its logical construction, regular grammar, and simple pronunciation, Esperanto is an excellent candidate for use in translation software, machine translation and speech recognition [2, p. 3].

What's about Esperanto's future? Its history is not too promising: there was political opposition to Esperanto. Both Hitler and Stalin persecuted users of this new language. Stalin labeled it as "the language of spies". Consequently the use of Esperanto never reached a significant level of popularity. However the language was somehow kept alive and slowly spread among selected groups [3, p. 5].

Nowadays English is the most spoken language all over the world. But many foreigners, despite studying English for years, never speak it fluently. The reason is that English is one of the most complex languages. It is full of inconsistencies between the way it is spoken and the way it is written [1, p. 6]. Another problem is that English carries political baggage. English has gained its "worldwide" stature because of the current economic and political power of English-speaking countries. In the past, every superpower briefly saw its native tongue used internationally: France, Spain, Portugal, and the Roman Empire. In fact, one of the main reasons that Esperanto was never adopted by the League of Nations was that France blocked efforts to adopt it. At the time, French was "the international language" and France expected it to stay that way forever but English succeeded [2, p. 4–5].

There are different reasons why Esperanto has not had even more success. There are no major governments supporting it, no big foundations funding it. Also, many people never bother to reach outside their own language group, so they muddle along in total ignorance of other countries. Often people will put up with anything to avoid learning a language, even a relatively easy one like Esperanto. Moreover, many people have not even heard of it yet. Esperanto was also set back by personal disagreements in the early decades of its existence and by the World Wars. Between and after the wars, however, Esperanto has steadily grown [2, p. 8–9].

Here are some of the things that Esperanto is good for:

- Promoting peace, making our world a little safer and a little better. It's a way that any citizen can get to know other countries better, and to tell others about our country and our ideas. It's a way that lets us bypass the governments.
- Introducing other languages. It helps you learn how languages are put together, introduce a great deal of vocabulary in European languages.
- Being an ideal second language.
- International understanding. You can't be friends with people if you can't talk to them.
- Joining the world. Esperanto is a way to treat everyone on our planet on the basis of complete equality, meeting them half way.
- Learning about other countries, meeting people from other countries.
- Business. This one's a little shaky right now... But even business people routinely use it someday [2, p. 3–4].

Fortunately, Esperanto can be spread because of people who are willing to learn it now [2, p. 9]. This will foster friendship, narrow the differences among people, banish strife and conflict, reduce tension and stress, enhance understanding, open up more opportunities of trade and investment, increase interactions, assimilate the best brains of the world to find cures for deadly diseases, make life comfortable and enjoyable, bring peace and accelerate economic development [6].

The Scottish Esperanto poet and translator William Auld said Esperanto should be considered a major work of art. In fact, he argued, Esperanto was greater than the Mona Lisa or the ninth symphony of Beethoven because, unlike these, the language, published by the Polish doctor Ludoviko Zamenhof in 1887, could itself be used to create other works of art [3].

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