

What is Esperanto?

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Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

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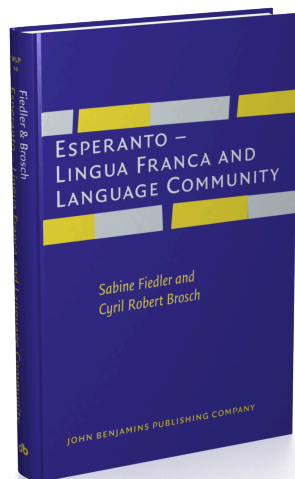
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What is Esperanto?

The foundations of Esperanto, in 1887 still called simply “Lingvo Internacia” (‘international language’), were laid by one person with one aim: to make communication between people of different mother tongues easier and more equitable. In linguistics, such a language, which does not directly stem from forgotten prehistory or is not the result of the evolution of one language into another over generations, but goes back to a conscious act of language planning, is called a planned language (see Chapter 7). Outside interlinguistics, the field of their study, such systems are also referred to as “artificial languages”, “constructed languages”, “international auxiliary languages (IALs)”, “universal languages”, or “conlangs”. Their number has probably already reached almost one thousand,¹ but Esperanto is the only planned language project that has succeeded in becoming a fully functioning language with a vibrant international speech community. This is due to its structural properties (Janton, 1993; Nuessel, 2000; Wells, 1978), but above all to extralinguistic factors (Blanke, 2009). The main goal of this book is to show how Esperanto functions as a language in practical use.

If people hear the name of the language, a frequent reaction runs: “I didn’t know that still existed.” Many people are familiar with its name, some might know something about its creator Zamenhof (see Chapter 8) or even some structural characteristics of Esperanto, but they are not aware that it is used today in everyday conversations, as a language for special purposes, and as a medium for original and translated literature – and by some people even on a daily basis. To a large extent, this description even applies to linguists, despite growing research in this field. In addition, two peculiarities can be observed. The first is that Esperanto, or the topic of planned languages in general, arouses a considerable emotional response, or as Jane Edwards (1993, p. 23) puts it, “arguments on this subject are unusually heated”. The second oddity is that there are a relatively high number of specialists, even people of the greatest erudition, who, while choosing their words carefully in assessing other languages or subjects, not only marginalise or ignore the practice of Esperanto usage but express scathing judgements of the planned language, and

1. Their number varies enormously in the research literature depending on whether mere sketches and modified versions of existing projects are considered to qualify as projects. Back (1996, p. 884) speaks of about 300 more or less well elaborated planned language systems.

this on the basis of easily disproven arguments. We confine the presentations of those refusals of Esperanto to two examples.² The first is the well-known German journalist Wolf Schneider, author of numerous language guides on German, whose article *Nachruf aufs Esperanto* [‘An obituary for Esperanto’], published in the respected Swiss journal *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*,³ claimed:

Kunstsprachen bieten keine Kinderlieder und keine Verse an, keine Flüche, keine Witze, keine Redensarten. Ihre Wörter sind eindeutig und folglich einschichtig, sie haben keine Aura und keine Tiefe.

[Artificial languages offer no songs for children, no nursery rhymes, no swearing, no jokes, no sayings. Their words are unambiguous, hence one-layered. They have no aura and no depth.]

The second example comes from a 2017 interview with the distinguished French philosopher and philologist Barbara Cassin, in which she highlighted the “failure of Esperanto” (which probably means that it is not spoken as the world’s most common second language), creating the impression that Esperanto had never left the pages of its first modest brochure:

It does not work because how could one turn it into a language? Leibniz hoped that those who didn’t get along could sit around a table and say to one another, “let’s calculate and we will know who is right.” No, language cannot be reduced to a calculation, and Esperanto does not work because it is artificial, insufficient, without any thickness of history nor of the signifier, without authors and works – “desperanto,” as the poet Michel Deguy put it. As dead as a dead language, Esperanto is no one’s maternal language.⁴

Psychologist Claude Piron (1994) interprets the opposition to Esperanto as a defence mechanism against an underlying anxiety, because, among other things, the concept of a planned language is subconsciously perceived by people as a threat to their mother tongues, which they consider symbols of identity and (wrongly) regard as something immutable. Blanke (2015, p. 202) points out:

2. Von Wunsch-Rolshoven (2018) devoted a study to this topic, mentioning a large variety of misjudgements.

3. See <http://folio.nzz.ch/1994/oktober/nachruf-aufs-esperanto>. The article was reprinted in Schneider’s (2009) book (pp. 106–109). All Internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time of going to press if not otherwise indicated.

4. e-flux conversations. <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/the-power-of-bilingualism-interview-with-barbara-cassin-french-philosopher-and-philologist/6252>. The interview is a translation of the French original: Barbara Cassin 2012. *Plus d’une langue*. Montrouge (Bayard Culture).

Inaccurate presentations of topics in interlinguistics and Esperantology are not automatically expressions of prejudice or intentional ignorance. We must concede that a planned language, functioning in practice, is an anomaly in the conceptual sphere of no small number of traditionally trained linguists.

In addition, he mentions a “*specific language barrier* that inhibits access to the scholarly literature” on planned languages, as about sixty per cent of this literature is written in a planned language, primarily Esperanto (Blanke 2018, p. 124, original emphasis).

If Esperanto is “a dead language” without wit and wordplay, what are we to make of text (1), the fragment of a conversation between five people (two English native speakers, A and D, a German native speaker, B, a Dutch native speaker, C, and a French native speaker, E, at a restaurant talking about the meals they have just ordered?⁵

- (1) A: *Ni verŝajne ĉiuj prenis la supon, ĉu ne?*
 B: *Jes, mi ne estas tre malsata, do supo konvenas.*
 A: *Sed VI mendis ion alian, <name (of C)>, ĉu ne?*
 C: *Mi decidis preni la “penne”.*
 A: *Lapenna, kiel vi povas?*
 All: *@(3)@*
 C: *Ja temas pri “penne”*
 E: *Pene, espereble ne estos tre pene ĝin manĝi*
 A/D/B: *@(.)@*
 C: *Kaj via supo, kiu supo estas?*
 A: *Mi ne scias en Esperanto: parsnip. Kio estas parsnip? <D’s name>?*
 D: *Mi ne konas la vorton.*
 A: *Kiu scias?*
 B: *Mi eĉ ne scias en la germana, kvankam mi konas en la angla, sed nur pro la proverbo. Ni ne uzas ĝin por manĝaĵoj.*
 A: *Kaj en la franca?*
 E: *Panaïs.*
 A: *Do iomete kiel “penne” @(.)@*
 All: *@(1)@*
 [...]
 C: *Sed pri kiu supo temas?*
 A: *Estas rapo, aŭ karoto, sed blanka.*
 C: *Mi komprenas.*
 [...]

5. This conversation occurred in Liverpool on October 20th, 2016. It is the only example in this book that was not recorded, but is presented based on notes taken from memory.

- A: *Ĉu vi konas tiun junan viron, verŝajne italo, kiu jam ofte majstris ricevi monon de EU por projekto? Mi forgesis lian nomon.*
- B: *Ĉu <name>?*
- A: *Ne ne, ne gravas, ni nomu lin sinjoro Parsnip.*
- A/B/D: *@(2)@*
- A: *Tiu sinjoro Parsnip lastatempe [...]*
- [A: All of us have probably taken the soup, haven't we?
- B: Yes, I'm not very hungry. So a soup is appropriate.
- A: But YOU ordered something else, <C's name>?
- C: I've decided to take penne.
- A: Lapenna, how could you?
- All: *@(3)@*
- C: It is about "penne".
- E: *Pene*, I hope it won't be laborious to eat it.
- A/B/D: *@(.)@*
- C: And your soup. What kind of soup is it?
- A: I don't know in Esperanto – *parsnip*. What is *parsnip*, <D's name>?
- D: I don't know the word.
- A: Who knows?
- B: I don't even know it in German, although I know it in English, but only because of the proverb. We don't use it for meals.
- A: And in French?
- E: *Panaïs*.
- A: So a bit like "penne" *@(.)@*.
- All: *@(1)@*
- (...)
- C: But what kind of soup is it?
- A: It's turnip, or carrot, but white.
- C: I see.
- (...)
- A: Do you know this young man, probably Italian, who has managed several times to receive money from the EU for projects? I've forgotten his name.
- B: Maybe <name>?
- A: No no, doesn't matter, we'll call him Mr Parsnip.
- A/B/D: *@(2)@*
- A: The other day this Mr Parsnip (...)]

The conversation presented in Example (1) has been chosen for this introductory chapter as it represents a typical piece of Esperanto usage:

- The language has the function of a *lingua franca*, i.e. it is used habitually by the people in question, who do not have the same mother tongue, to facilitate their communication (see Chapter 2).
- It represents lively talk reminiscent of communication in a native language.
- It includes passages of verbal and non-verbal humour (@ symbolizes laughter) (see Chapter 20): in line 8 we find a play on words based on the near-homophony between the Italian *penne* and Esperanto *pene* ('arduously, laboriously')
- The excerpt illustrates that successful communication presupposes shared knowledge of both language and culture: the participants are all familiar with the particular role that Ivo Lapenna played in the development of Esperanto.
- Language – in this case the translation of the English word *parsnip* – is made a topic of conversation (in Chapter 23.4 we will refer to this phenomenon as *Toño's Law*).

The use of Esperanto in this way could not have been foreseen by Zamenhof, but is the result of its more than 130-year history and an active and growing speech community.⁶ It will become clear in the following chapters that Esperanto is not a dead language without authors and works, but a mature language that, of course, also has nursery rhymes and swear words, a language whose use is a sociolinguistic reality that may well repay further study.

6. Following Gumperz (2009, p. 66), we use 'speech community' in a broad sense here, as "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage". See also Rampton (2010).

