

Methods and data

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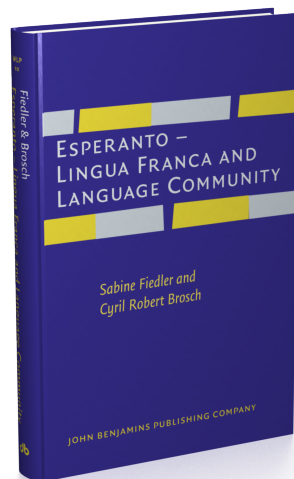
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Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

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Methods and data

Research on Esperanto is accompanied by a dilemma that has the character of a catch-22 situation. On the one hand, it is not possible to describe the language adequately without speaking it and being familiar with the community of its speakers. The two blatant misjudgements presented in Chapter 1 are a clear illustration of what might otherwise result. On the other hand, researchers who fulfil this precondition and who are active Esperanto speakers are often not seen as unbiased and serious researchers (Fiedler, 2015a, p. 99). Tonkin (1993, p. 12) describes the phenomenon as follows:

A major problem (...) is that knowledge of Esperanto tends to disqualify the researcher from studying it: to know Esperanto is to be regarded as an enthusiast, and hence biased; not to know it obviously disqualifies the researcher from writing about it (or ought to: there are some notorious exceptions). Hence the opportunity for outsiders to get to know the language and its community well are severely restricted.

The authors of this book have been speaking Esperanto for many years and participating in the Esperanto speech community mainly out of linguistic interests. Therefore, there may be readers and reviewers of this book who deny the scientific value of our findings and call us biased. We are convinced, however, that we are only as biased as a specialist in Basque studies speaking Basque and visiting the Basque region, or a researcher on English as a lingua franca speaking English and taking part in international events that use English. As Hutchby and Woolfitt (2008, p. 106) point out, “it is absolutely necessary that [...] analysts are either members of, or have a sound understanding of, the culture from which their data have been drawn”. We have made clear in Chapter 2 that there is a distinction between the language and its community (which both fall within the scope of our explorations) on the one hand, and the political and philosophical ideas and ideals connected with the movement to make Esperanto the world’s first foreign language (a topic which does not concern us here at all) on the other. As much as one can argue against the latter, there is no denying the easily verifiable fact that a certain amount of people really do use the language for a number of purposes. By ignoring any speculation about the future and refraining from political comments and instead presenting

the objective facts in a scientific and comprehensible way, we are confident that an unprejudiced reader will recognise the value of our study and be capable of judging whether something is a matter of fact or of interpretation.

This book concerns Esperanto not as an abstract system, but as a language spoken by a speech community. We focus on its dynamics, behaviour, and linguistic peculiarities. For this reason, the present study can be categorised as a work in the realm of sociolinguistics. While surely some of the phenomena we deal with here can be interpreted by means of “pure” linguistics (and to our minds do not call for a methodological substantiation or introduction here), the more fundamental questions require the use of methods of qualitative social research. Within this framework, our research draws on various methods, all of which have to fit the collective and diaspora-like character of the Esperanto speech community. These are mainly conversation analysis, ethnographic research, and the documentary method. We made extensive use of tools like participant observation (with note-taking and audio-recording, see below) in events where Esperanto was spoken, and conducted semi-structured interviews in order to compensate for the lack of basic research into the planned language thus far. In particular cases (for example, speakers’ attitudes on accents in Chapter 24), additional methods of data interpretation served to supplement the findings. For some of our research questions, besides consulting the literature we analysed discussions and other data found on the Internet. As methods of investigation depend on individual research tasks, more detailed descriptions of the particular methods applied will be given in the relevant chapters of Part III.

The empirical parts of our study were carried out in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the MIME project (see Preface) and the University of Leipzig. It is noteworthy in this context that – being aware that their language lacks both scholarly attention and a high reputation within the general population – Esperanto speakers are generally open and supportive with regard to research into their communication, readily granting permission to be recorded. The audio or video documentation of Esperanto speech events is thus not uncommon in the community. These conditions have served to diminish what is known as the observer’s paradox (Labov, 1972, p. 209), so that the data this exploration draws on can be regarded as naturally occurring communication, i.e. as data “that would have occurred regardless of the investigator’s interventions or research aspirations” (Wagner & Firth, 1997, p. 343).

The backbone of our research is an extensive corpus of contemporary spoken Esperanto. It was recorded during our fieldwork between 2014 and 2018 (see nos. 1–198 in the annexed *List of recordings*) and is supplemented by recordings from recent years that were available publicly or made available to us (nos. 199–205). All together, the dataset amounts to 188 hours of audio (and in a few cases also video)

material. Due to time constraints,¹³ only a small portion of the speech events has been fully transcribed. In most cases, transcriptions were limited to the passages containing the occurrences under investigation (e.g. metaphors, word searches or plays on words). The transcription conventions, tailored to the needs of the individual research topics, are based mainly on the systems of Levinson (1983), Firth (1996) and Wagner & Firth (1997) (see Key to transcription symbols at the beginning of the book).

The investigation is mainly based on data collected during the following national and international Esperanto meetings:

- Tria Interlingvistika Simpozio “Problemoj de internacia lingva komunikado kaj iliaj solvoj” (Third Interlinguistics Symposium “Problems of international linguistic communication and their solutions”) Poznań, Poland, 25–26 Sept. 2014
- Dua Sesio de Interlingvistikaj Studoj (Second Interlinguistic Studies Session) Poznań, Poland, 2–6 Feb. 2015
- Internacia Kolokvo “Vivanta lingvo de vivanta komonumo” de la Kultura Centro Esperantista (International Colloquium “Living language of a living community” of the Esperantist Cultural Centre) La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, 27 Feb.–2 Mar. 2015
- Kvina partnera renkontiĝo de Grundtvig-projekto “Kultura diverseco kaj multlingveco en Eŭropo” (The fifth partner meeting of the Grundtvig project “Cultural diversity and multilingualism of Europe”) Herzberg, Germany, 24–26 May 2015
- 100-a Universala Kongreso de Esperanto (The 100th World Esperanto Congress) Lille, France, 25–31 July 2015
- Sesa Kongreso de Kuba Esperanto-Asocio (Sixth Congress of the Cuban Esperanto Association) Havana, Cuba, 19–20 Nov. 2015
- La 103-a Universala Kongreso de Esperanto (The 103rd World Esperanto Congress) Lisbon, Portugal, 28 Jul.–4 Aug. 2018
- Nitobe-Simpozio “Esperanto kaj universitato” (Nitobe Symposium “Esperanto and University”) Lisbon, Portugal, 4–5 Aug. 2018

The meetings listed here represent typical speech events in the life of the Esperanto community, with Esperanto being the default language.¹⁴ As for content, some activities are related to the use of Esperanto, whereas others (such as lectures on academic topics or courses on the culture and language of the host country) are

13. Based on our experience, it would take about ten years and a full-time position to transcribe the whole material.

14. See Chapter 9 about the main domains of Esperanto communication.

not connected with the language. We should mention that not all our investigations on the features of Esperanto communication presented in the individual chapters of this book are based on the complete dataset contained in Appendix 1. This is because our work took several years and we carried out some studies on specific topics with regard to particular conferences using the dataset available to us at that time, while the collection of data continued after this. The details of a given investigation will be provided in the relevant subchapters.

As can be seen in the *List of recordings* (see Appendix 1), Esperanto communication manifests itself in a wide range of particular speech events or genres of both formal and informal character. Table 1 provides an overview of the genres that we distinguish, taking our dataset as a point of departure.¹⁵

Table 1. Overview of genres that were distinguished in the database

Indication used in references	Genre	Explanation	Example
Pres	(Conference) presentation	Includes speeches or lectures on a particular subject	International Congress University lecture “Sukcesoj kaj perspektivoj en planedosciencoj” (Success and perspectives in planetary science)
Disc	Discussion	Includes conversations and debates about a particular topic; questions and answers following a lecture	A working-group meeting of the editors of an Esperanto journal
Int	Interview	Includes meetings between us as researchers and a specialist who answers questions	A semi-structured interview with a representative of the Esperanto Academy
Tour	Touristic or cultural event	Includes guided tours of a town or museum; information given during a coach trip	Guided tour of Lille city centre
Edu	Conversation and talk in an educational context	Includes teacher talk (information on a particular topic and instructions) and conversations between students in seminars	Teacher informs the students about the aim of the seminar; in group work, students discuss the use of gestures in intercultural communication
cerem	Ceremony	Includes opening and closing ceremonies of congresses, speeches at receptions	Welcoming speech of the mayor of the town hosting the congress

15. We understand ‘genres’ as conventional rhetorical forms that are used by speakers who share some set of communicative purposes to respond to recurring situations (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004). See also Chapter 23 on written and oral communication.

Table 1. (continued)

Indication used in references	Genre	Explanation	Example
Infl	Informal or small talk	Includes conversations during meals and excursions	Conversation between conference participants during a coffee break
Oth	Other	Includes speech events that are not mentioned above and are hard to classify	An auctioneer's offers

At the end of this chapter, we provide a number of technical and terminological hints that will be useful when reading the other parts of this book:

- Unless explicitly noted otherwise, all translations in this book are our own.
- Unless otherwise indicated, all Internet links given in this book were correct at the time of going to press.
- The references of our linguistic examples, e.g. [112 (hun; disc; Lille) 11:42], include: the number of the recording (see Appendix 1), the speaker's native language (see list of abbreviations),¹⁶ the genre (see above), the place of communication, and the time in the recording).

16. In those cases where we did not know a speaker's mother tongue we decided to indicate this by a question mark.

