

The history and ideological background of the Esperanto movement

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Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

Sabine Fiedler and Cyril Robert Brosch

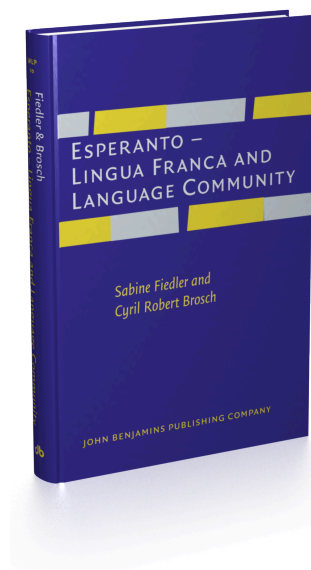
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The history and ideological background of the Esperanto movement

Esperanto was published with the original name, *Lingvo Internacia* ('international language'), in Warsaw in 1887. Its author, Lazar' Markovič Zamenhof (Лазарь Маркович Заменгоф, with the non-Jewish additional name Людвик/Ludwik; in Yiddish אַליעזר לודוויג זאַמענהאָף), later usually named L. L. Zamenhof, adopted the pseudonym *Doktoro Esperanto* ('one who hopes'), which eventually became the name of the language.²⁵

Zamenhof was born in 1859 in the town of Białystok, in a part of the Russian Empire that is now eastern Poland, to a family of assimilated Lithuanian Jews ("Litvaks"). His father was a teacher of modern languages who had worked his way up to the position of a tsarist censor, but later lost his job. The family was often in financial trouble, causing them to relocate several times before finally settling in Warsaw at the end of the century. Zamenhof grew up with his mother tongues Russian and Yiddish in a multi-ethnic setting where Polish, German, and Lithuanian were also spoken. He also learned French, Latin, Classical Greek, and Hebrew. From a very young age, he considered the language barrier between the ethnic groups to be the main reason for inter-ethnic hostility and ignorance, and he began working on the idea of overcoming these problems and the resulting mutual hatred through a neutral tongue – one that could serve as a means of communication between diverse nations and place people on an equal footing. The first signs of his international language go back to the year 1878. In around 1880 Zamenhof was also intensely studying Yiddish, for which he wrote the first modern grammar (although this was not published in his lifetime). After antisemitic pogroms in 1881 Zamenhof had to leave Moscow, where he was studying ophthalmology, and became an adherent of Zionism. However, he rejected the plans to revive Classical Hebrew (which later nevertheless turned out to be successful)

25. In recent years, many new biographies of Zamenhof have appeared, of which those by Korzhenkov (2010) and Künzli (2010) are particularly noteworthy. Especially interesting for the relationship between Esperanto and Zamenhof's Jewish identity is the collection of and commentary on sources in Jagodzińska (2012). For aspects of the history of the Esperanto movement see also Schor (2016) and Pereltsvaig (2017, part 2).

and to valorise Yiddish (then called “the Jargon”) and continued working on the project of an international language, which in his eyes would serve not only as an additional language for inter-ethnic communication, but also as the common language of a soon-to-be-established Jewish state and nation. Later Zamenhof distanced himself from Zionist projects, and after 1900 he started propagating a universal set of principles based on the commonalities of religions which he first called Hillelism (after the ancient rabbi Hillel) and later Homaranism (which can be rendered ‘Humanitism’, from Esperanto *hom-* ‘man/human being’, *-ar-* ‘collection of/group’, *-an-* ‘member/adherent’, *-ism-* ‘theory/system’, *-o* ‘noun’). His goal was to unite the world’s religions on a neutral base without conflating them into one. In 1917 he died from heart failure in Warsaw. In 1960, UNESCO recognised him as one of the “great personalities of humankind”, and in 2015 it declared its intention to officially remember him on the occasion of the centenary of his death in 2017.

In the summer of 1887, while Volapük was at its apogee, Zamenhof, with the help of his bride, Klara Zilbernik, succeeded in publishing the modest forty-page brochure (now known as *Unua Libro* ‘first book’) of his *Lingvo Internacia* in Russian, German and French (it was later also published in Polish, English, and other languages). Unlike J. M. Schleyer, the inventor of Volapük (see Chapter 7), as early as 1888 he relinquished all personal rights to the language and proclaimed it the property of its users.

Mi scias tre bone, ke la verko de unu homo ne povas esti senerara, se tiu homo eĉ estus la plej genia kaj multe pli instruita ol mi. Tial mi ne donis ankoraŭ al mia lingvo la finan formon; mi ne parolas: “jen la lingvo estas kreita kaj preta, tiel mi volas, tia ĝi estu kaj tia ĝi restu!” Ĉio bonigebla estos bonigata per la konsiloj de l’ mondo. Mi ne volas esti kreinto de l’ lingvo, mi volas nur esti iniciatoro. (Zamenhof *La Dua Libro de l’ lingvo internacia* I; Dietterle 1929, p. 26, original emphasis)

[I know very well that the work of a *single person* cannot be without mistakes, even if that person were the greatest genius and more educated than I am. Therefore, I have not given the language its final form; I am not saying: “here is the language created and complete, this is how I want it to be and to remain!” Everything worth improving will be improved by means of the advice of the world. I don’t want to be the *creator* of the language, I merely want to be an *initiator*.]

Zamenhof started corresponding with people interested in the language (among them Edgar von Wahl, the future inventor of Occidental), and in 1888 the *Dua Libro* (‘second book’) and an appendix to it were published to solidify the final form of the language. In the same year the Volapük club of Nuremberg, Germany, switched over to Esperanto and began publishing the first Esperanto journal, *La Esperantisto*, in 1889. In the years that followed, during which Zamenhof lived in relative poverty, the language slowly spread throughout Russia and Germany, but the movement was embroiled in quarrels over linguistic reforms. When these were

finally rejected by a majority in a poll in 1894, many reformists (among them the Nuremberg club) left the language, and the ban of *La Esperantisto* by the tsarist police in 1895 – prompted by an article by Leo Tolstoy, who had taken an interest in Esperanto – led to the end of the journal (see Lins, 2016, pp. 15/16).

With the language in real danger of disappearing, Esperanto was saved from this crisis by Louis de Beaufront, who successfully propagated it in France and Western Europe – not as an idealistic remedy to save mankind from war, but as a practical means of communication for commercial and scientific needs (Garvía, 2015, pp. 77–81). Between 1900 and 1914 Esperanto flourished, with the foundation of hundreds of local groups, journals, and specialised organisations.²⁶ Many texts were translated into Esperanto and original literary works began to appear (Minnaja & Silber, 2015; Sutton, 2008). In the summer of 1905, nearly 700 Esperanto speakers came together in Boulogne-sur-Mer for the first Esperanto world congress. At the congress, the so-called Bulonja Deklaracio ('Declaration of Boulogne') declared the grammatical and lexical basis published as the *Fundamento de Esperanto* ('Esperanto foundation') to be the immutable linguistic norm (see Chapter 9). A *Lingva Komitato* ('Language Committee') was established, which later installed (1908) and eventually became (1948) the Esperanto Academy (*Akademio de Esperanto*). The *Fundamento* comprises a basic grammar (i.e. the grammatical part of the first textbook *Unua Libro*, originally published in 1887), a list of official vocabulary items (*Universala Vortaro* 'universal dictionary', Zamenhof, 1894) and stylistic exercises (*Ekzercaro*, 1893). Such a World Esperanto Congress (*Universala Kongreso de Esperanto*, UK) has taken place every year since 1905, interrupted only by the World Wars and the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ The first international Esperanto association, *Universala Esperanto-Asocio* (UEA), was founded in 1908, the year of the Ido schism. The outbreak of the First World War put an end to the rapid growth of Esperanto – not only physically, but also ideologically, as the dream of universal, peaceful progress was drowned in blood.

What is often referred to as the Ido schism has an exciting history that started in 1901, when the *Délégation pour l'adoption d'une langue auxiliaire internationale*, led by the logician and Leibniz researcher Louis Couturat and the mathematician Léopold Leau, was founded with the task of raising public awareness of the need for an international auxiliary language and deciding on the most suitable project among those existing at the time. Zamenhof had selected Louis de Beaufront to

26. These included organisations for followers of various religions, for pacifists, vegetarians, philatelists, as well as professional organisations for railroaders, scientists, physicians, etc. (Blanke & Blanke, 2015).

27. The anniversary 100th World Esperanto Congress in Lille, France, in 2015 was attended by approximately 2,700 participants.

present Esperanto, which of course had a reasonable chance of success. When, after years of studying the variety of projects and listening to their representatives and with two monographs on the topic, the *Délégation* still failed to make a decision, a working committee of eighteen scholars (including prominent figures such as Otto Jespersen, Wilhelm Ostwald, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, and Hugo Schuchardt, in addition to Couturat and Leau) was established in 1907. In one of its final sessions, Couturat presented an anonymous project to the members of the committee whose creator called himself “Ido” and which included modifications to Esperanto that had already been discussed as flaws of the language. The committee decided to adopt Esperanto as the universal auxiliary language, but on condition that Esperanto be modified in line with the proposals expressed in the “Ido” project. As Esperanto, as we have shown, had by this time already been in active use in both written and spoken communication, the speech community was unable to agree on the proposed modifications. From that time onwards the reform proposals adopted by Ido were seen as a separate language, and in future years Ido was considered a rival to Esperanto. When in 1908 it transpired that Beaufront was the author of Ido (see Garvía, 2015, pp. 134–137) and when he became one of its leading figures, this was seen as a kind of high treason by Esperanto speakers, which caused vociferous debate. Others believe that Beaufront’s confession as the author of Ido was a lie to cover Couturat, who as a member of the *Délégation* was not permitted to present his own project (Gordin, 2015, p. 147).

The 1920s saw, in addition to the struggle between Esperanto and its competitors Ido and Occidental (see Chapter 7), the flourishing of the Esperanto working class movement, which brought together manifold socialist streams in *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda* (SAT, ‘World Association for Non-Nationhood’). At the same time, the bourgeois movement lobbied the League of Nations to vote for the introduction of Esperanto, but the positive report by vice-secretary Nitobe Inazō in 1921, backed only by smaller countries, was finally rejected through the adversarial activities of France, which opposed the possibility of another rival for the position of French (which was already under pressure because of English). In the 1930s, the fascist and communist regimes in Europe (and also in Japan) grew suspicious of the so-called cosmopolitan activities of Esperanto speakers, which culminated in the dissolution of all planned language associations in Nazi Germany in 1936 and the arrest and execution of leading Soviet Esperanto activists as spies in 1937 (O’Keeffe 2021). While using the language was never banned per se, promoting it could be extremely dangerous. The socialist movement in particular was largely wiped out (for an overview, see Lins, 1988 and 2016).

Esperanto was also gaining ground outside Europe. In the first half of the twentieth century, large speech communities existed in Asia, particularly in Japan and

China, and in Brazil.²⁸ The language played an important role in the history of Japanese popular internationalism (Rapley, 2016). It was learned and discussed by intellectuals and ordinary people alike, and, according to Konishi (2013, p. 25), “[b]y 1928, Japan had the highest number of registered Esperanto speakers by far of any non-European country, including the United States”. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the history of Esperanto in China was closely connected with anarchism (Müller & Benton, 2006). In addition, it is noteworthy that Esperanto speakers played an active part in the Chinese Latinization movement in several periods between 1911 and 1958 (Wang & Liu, 2017).

After the Second World War, the Esperanto movement attempted to reorganise and gain support in the United Nations. In 1954, UEA successfully campaigned for a UNESCO resolution which called on all member states to explore the possibilities of the use of Esperanto, but, like a similar resolution in 1985, this did not have many practical consequences. In the Eastern Bloc, it was not until post-Stalinist times that organised Esperanto activities were able to start. But once the movement had been re-established in Eastern Europe, Esperanto often received generous support from governments for reasons of prestige – while at the same time secret police always kept an eye on the relations of Esperanto speakers to other, especially Western, countries. While leading figures of the movement were still trying to garner political support for the long-dreamed-of *Fina Venko* (lit. ‘final victory’), i.e. the worldwide adoption of Esperanto, the majority of speakers preferred to just use the language. This led to a considerable growth in literary output, especially prose, while before that Esperanto had been used mostly for poetry (Sutton, 2008). It also led to the beginning of an ever-growing music scene²⁹ and more and more international meetings, mostly of a specialised nature (e.g. for young people).

In 1980, in a manifesto drawn up at an international Esperanto youth congress in the Finnish town of Rauma, some younger Esperanto speakers even called for a turn away from political goals, as the speech community was already sufficient for all kinds of activities. This orientation towards Esperanto as a self-elected alternative culture has been referred to as *raŭmismo* since the mid-eighties and used in opposition to *finvenkismo*. However, as far as the individual Esperanto speaker is concerned, the two orientations do not seem mutually exclusive – a point of view argued by a number of Esperanto researchers (Fiedler, 2002a; Tišljär, 1997; Tonkin,

28. For more detailed surveys see Pereltšvaig “State-of-the-Art: The History of Esperanto” (<https://www.esperantic.org/en/research/state-of-the-art/state-of-the-art-esperanto-history/>) and Kőkény & Bleier, 1986/1933, pp. 62–66, 97–99, 392–405).

29. See, for example, <https://www.vinilkosmo-mp3.com/en/>.

2006). Kimura (2012: 169), referring to Zamenhof's formulations of *Esperantujo* ('Esperantoland') and *popolo esperantista* ('Esperantist people'), even contends that "from the beginning, Esperanto has developed along dual tracks as a movement and as a community".

The end of the Cold War and the rise of the Internet after 1989 mark the newest phase of the Esperanto movement/speech community. The discontinuation of monetary support from Eastern European states and the "disappearance" of thousands of members in these countries, who had joined the movement chiefly because it was their only chance to have international contacts, was a huge blow to the traditional organisations and the movement as a whole. But Western associations, too, faced a steady loss of members,³⁰ as the possibilities of the Internet saw them lose their former monopoly on procuring information and contacts. Today there is no longer any need to join a club in order to consume the cultural products of Esperanto or to speak the language: e-books, YouTube, voiceover IP software, etc. allow for immediate contact with the world by means of the planned language. Against this backdrop one could argue that while the classical Esperanto *movement* is shrinking, the speech *community* is growing.

The following timeline may serve as a summary of the information on the history of Esperanto given in this chapter:

- 1859:** L. L. Zamenhof is born to a family of assimilated Lithuanian Jews ("Litvaks") in Białystok, in the Russian Empire (today Eastern Poland);
- 1878–1881:** First texts in a so-called Pra-Esperanto (protoforms of Esperanto from Zamenhof's time at school and university);
- 1887:** Publication of the first brochures of *Lingvo Internacia* in Warsaw (in Russian, German, and French, with the pseudonym "Dr. Esperanto");
- 1888:** First Esperanto club (in Nuremberg, Germany);
- 1889–1895:** First Esperanto journal *La Esperantisto* (ending following a ban imposed by tsarist censorship);
- 1895–1900:** Stagnation in Germany and Russia, overcome by its spread in France, where practical usage was emphasised instead of idealistic notions of peace and fraternity;
- after 1900:** Beginning of the social and ideological differentiation of the Esperanto movement, foundation of special organisations, national associations, journals; first original literature and rapid growth of the movement in Europe;

30. An example is the Universal Esperanto Association UEA, which had nearly 44,000 members in 1987 and less than 15,000 in 2014, see https://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Membronombroj_de_UEA#Diagramo_kaj_tabelo_de_la_suma_membraro_ekde_1908.

- 1905:** First World Esperanto Congress (*Universala Kongreso*, UK) in Boulogne-sur-Mer (France), which also saw the enactment of the *Fundamento de Esperanto* as the immutable linguistic norm, and the foundation of the *Lingva Komitato*, later to become the *Akademio de Esperanto* (Esperanto language academy);
- 1908:** Foundation of the Universal Esperanto Association *Universala Esperanto-Asocio* (UEA) and of the *Akademio de Esperanto*; Ido schism;
- 1914–1918:** First World War halts many activities, ending Esperanto's rapid dissemination;
- 1917:** Zamenhof dies in Warsaw;
- 1920s:** Very active working class movement; official support for Esperanto in the League of Nations, but finally failure of all attempts because of French opposition;
- 1927:** Foundation of the International Esperanto Museum in Vienna (today the "Planned Languages" Collection of the Austrian National Library ÖNB);
- 1930s:** Systematic suppression of Esperanto organisations and activities in totalitarian countries (Germany 1936, Soviet Union 1937);
- after WWII:** Reorganisation, but in the Eastern Bloc not until post-Stalinist times (e.g. in the GDR in 1965); tension between official promotion and mistrustful monitoring in the East;
- 1954, 1985:** UNESCO resolutions calling for the official acknowledgement of Esperanto; beginning of official relations between UEA and UN;
- 1970s:** Formation of, and emphasis on, an independent culture (literature, music, meetings); at the same time, the appearance of ever more scientific studies (1906–1971: twenty-eight dissertations, 1975–1987: ninety-five dissertations: see Symoens 1989);
- 1980:** Manifesto of Rauma: some Esperantists abandon the political goals of the movement;
- 1987:** Anniversary World Congress in Warsaw with record attendance of 5,900 participants;
- after 1990:** Political changes and technological advances (end of Communism, Internet) defy the traditional Esperanto organisations, which lose many members, while the use of the language increases, especially through an increasing number of meetings and on the Internet.

