

Main current domains

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Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

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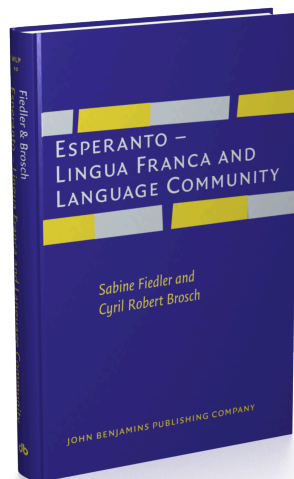
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Main current domains

For practical and methodological reasons there are no reliable data on the number of Esperanto speakers worldwide. According to the Ethnologue, the standard reference for living languages, Esperanto is the second language of two million people, while, according to membership-based statistics, Esperanto speakers number only approximately 150,000 (Fettes, 2003, p. 43). A modern approach to assessing the number of Esperanto speakers should not ignore the major impact that the Internet has had on how the language is used. Wandel (2015, p. 318) suggests an updated estimate of the number of Esperanto speakers worldwide based on the number of people on Facebook who claim to speak the language: “A simple calculation accompanied by reasonable refinements leads to a number of approximately two million Esperanto users within the Internet community alone, probably significantly more worldwide.” A seminal collection of papers on planned languages, *Interlinguistics. Aspects of the science of planned languages* (Schubert, 1989 [ed.]), gives an impression of the broad range of estimates. Here, one of the authors posits a number of “between 2 and 3.5 million” speakers (Piron, 1989b, p. 157), while another suggests 500,000 (Pool & Grofman, 1989, p. 146). Of these two, the lower estimate seems to be reasonable to us, with the number of truly fluent speakers being much lower.

The ever-increasing numbers of participants in Esperanto events clearly attest to the fact that the language is not falling out of use, but rather gaining new speakers. Figure 2³¹ shows the number of participants in Esperanto events in Germany lasting at least one week (from which IS, AS, IF, and NR occur at the same time around the turn of the year).

Another indicator of growing interest in Esperanto is an increase in learners. More and more people are learning Esperanto in online courses that are offered free of charge (e.g. *lernu!*; *Duolingo*; *Livemocha*; *Lingolía*; *EsperantoLand*). The Esperanto course for English speakers by *Duolingo* was launched in late May 2015 and attracted about 400,000 learners in its first year. Courses for Spanish and Portuguese speakers have since been added, with a total of about 2.8 million people who had begun one of the three versions by the start of 2020.³²

31. Taken from https://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosiero:Renkontigoj_en_Germanio_partoprenantoj.png.

32. See <https://www.liberafolio.org/2020/03/31/kie-estas-la-duolinganoj/>

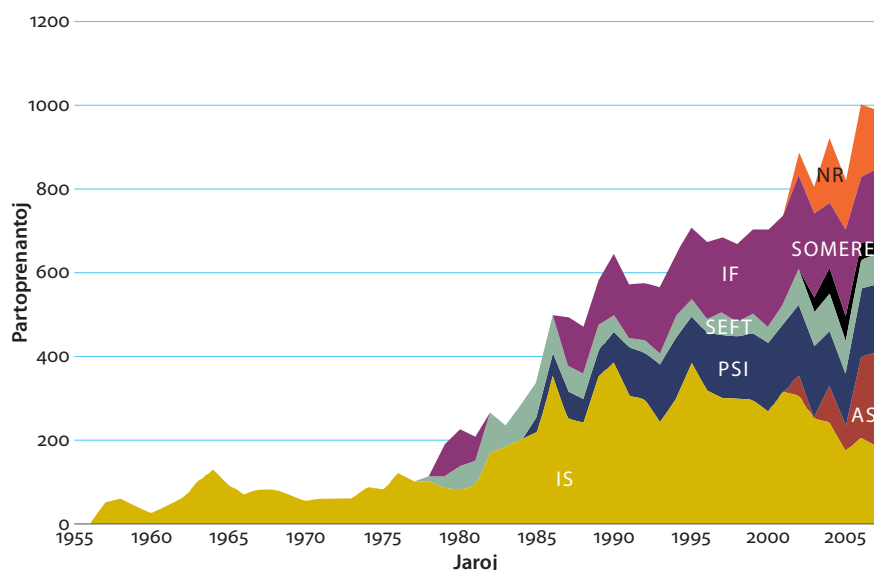


Figure 2. Participants in lengthy Esperanto events in Germany (jaroj = years, partoprenantoj = participants; Abbreviations: IS = Internacia Seminario ‘international seminar’, SEFT = Somera Esperanto-Familia/Feria Tendaro ‘Esperanto summer family/holiday camp’, IF = Internacia Festivalo ‘international festival’, PSI = Printempa Semajno Internacia ‘international springtime week’, AS = Ago-Semajno ‘action week’, NR = Novjara Renkontiĝo ‘New Year’s meeting’ and SOMERE = Somera Mezeŭropa Renkontiĝo ‘Central European summer meeting’)

The intense travel and meeting activities of Esperanto speakers – a specific trait of the community³³ – have led to a high number of international couples. For them, Esperanto often becomes, at least in the beginning, a family language and for their children an additional mother tongue. We will return to this topic in Chapter 10.

In Chapter 8, we mentioned the production of poetry and prose in the history of Esperanto. Strictly speaking, Esperanto was a literary language from its earliest beginnings. The 1887 *Unua Libro* included as examples of texts in the new language (in addition to a number of biblical translations and a letter) three poems, two of which were original. Soon afterwards, Zamenhof and other Esperanto pioneers started to translate important works of world literature, such as Dickens’ *The Battle of Life* (1891), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1894), Pushkin’s *Борис Годунов* (Boris Godunov) (Vasilij Devjatnin, 1894–95), Beaumarchais’ *Le Mariage*

33. For instance, the Esperanto calendar for May to September 2015 published in the magazine *Esperanto* 3, 2015 pp. 66–67 lists fifty-three multiple-day events in twenty-four countries.

de Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro) (Abraham A. Kofman, 1898), Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* (Ludwig E. Meier, 1906), Gogol's *Peвyзop* (The Government Inspector) (1907), Prus' *Faraon* (Pharaoh) (Kazimierz Bein, 1907), Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (Iphigenia in Tauris) (1908), Schiller's *Die Räuber* (The Robbers) (1908), Molière's *Georges Dandin* (1908), *Don Juan* (Émile Boirac, 1909), Orzeszkowa's *Marta* (1910), and Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (Antoni Grabowski, 1918). Translating literature helped to develop Esperanto's expressive qualities and to stabilise it, and it has also been regarded as proof that the language is capable of presenting work from other cultures (Cool, 1993, p. 73; Minnaja, 2018, p. 177). Translated literature from outside Europe includes Lu Xun's short stories (*Elektitaj noveloj*, 1939), Ihara Saikaku's *Five Women who Loved Love* (*Kvin Virinoj de Amoro*, 1966), Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Ruĝdoma Sonĝo*, 1985), Luo Guanzhong's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Romano pri la tri regnoj*, 2008) (Laulum, 2010). It is noteworthy that Esperanto has served also as a bridge language. For example, a number of works originally written in the languages of Central and Eastern Europe have been translated into Esperanto and then translated into Chinese and Japanese from the Esperanto versions (Janton, 1993, p. 94).

This short list of translations already illustrates a specific feature of translated literature in Esperanto: it is highly international and fundamentally democratic. In contrast to the situation in ethnic languages, Esperanto translations cover a large variety of source languages, including both “big” ones like English and French and “small” ones like Macedonian and Czech (see Fiedler 1999, p. 283f.).³⁴ Market strategies seem to be less important here than some Esperanto speakers' wishes to make the members of the speech community familiar with the culture of their home country. Of course, we have to consider that the total literary output in Esperanto (including translations) is a drop in the ocean compared to that in, say, English or German.

Esperanto literature has kept its important role in developing the language and its community, with specialist literary journals, literary competitions and prizes contributing to its advancement. The 2001 catalogue published by the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) contains more than 4,000 entries, among them both translated literary world classics and original works. Referring to the survey of original Esperanto literature by Sten Johansson, Minnaja (2018) points out that between the year 2000 and January 2014, more than 2,600 titles were published,

34. Statistics on the source languages of translated literature in Germany, for example, show that the most important languages in 2017 were English (66.5%), French (11.9%), Japanese (6.4%), Italian (2.7%) and Swedish (2.5%) (<https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/194342/umfrage/buchmarkt-hoerbuch-umsatz-nach-warengruppen/>).

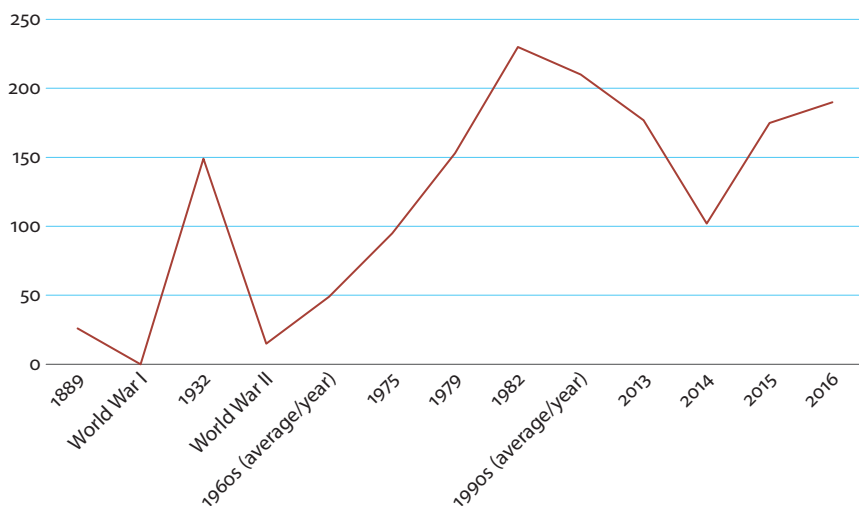


Figure 3. Development of the Esperanto book market (1889–2018) (Becker, 2017)

equivalent to more than 170 titles per year. Figure 3 provides an overview of the development of the Esperanto book market from 1889 to 2016.³⁵

There are two comprehensive presentations of Esperanto literature in general, each more than 700 pages long. Sutton's (2008) book in English provides an overview of Esperanto's most important original works, their authors and, by including reviews, readers' opinions on these for the general public, whereas Minnaja and Silber (2015) offer a compendium on Esperanto literature for the speech community. Both illustrate the rich history of Esperanto literature including various literary genres and schools, without ignoring special trends such as the Prague group, which made Esperanto a linguistic battlefield in the 1970s and 1980s with its lexical innovations (see Chapter 25). We agree with Tonkin (2000) that despite these literary innovators the language has remained relatively stable and accessible. In general, or more specifically in the terms of classic functional stylistics (Riesel, 1975), in Esperanto the language used in literary works is less far removed from everyday usage than we know to be the case in ethnic languages.

Esperanto has also been used as a language for special purposes (or scholarly language). Blanke and Blanke (2015) list twenty-four specialised Esperanto

35. Figure 3 is based on data published in the Esperanto journal *La Ondo de Esperanto* 5/2017 (Kaliningrad, Russia). It was created by Ulrich Becker and presented during his talk in the Soros lecture series in New York on November 10, 2017 (Becker, 2017). We thank Ulrich Becker for his permission to include the figures in this book.

organisations and thirty-seven disciplines with specialist publications and describe forestry, railway and medicine as the fields in which terminology development and unification have been particularly systematic and useful in Esperanto. Stabilised scientific vocabulary is recorded in over 200 dictionaries covering some ninety fields. The Universal Esperanto Association seeks to coordinate work on terminology and collaborates with the principal international terminological institutions. The annual World Esperanto Congress includes a Congress University (*Internacia Kongresa Universitato, IKU*) with lectures by university professors representing fields as diverse as astronomy, philosophy and zoology. The use of Esperanto as a language for special purposes is mainly restricted to its application within Esperanto circles. Only a few speakers use the language for professional goals outside the community, and there are only a few examples of specialist organisations or journals using the language (cf. Interlingua in the 1950s and 1960s: see Chapter 7). We will return to the topic of the professional use of Esperanto in Chapter 26.

Overall, it is impossible to equate the use of Esperanto with widely used or even world languages, either quantitatively or regarding the range of communicative functions. Literary writing and the use of Esperanto as a language for special purposes are the functional styles that are most developed in addition to everyday use. The domain of trade and business, one of the central areas in which English has flourished as a *lingua franca*, hardly exists in Esperanto communication. Domains like advertising, legal and institutional language use are likewise largely undeveloped, owing to the lack of a significant market or adoption at state administration level. The use of Esperanto in a professional context is restricted to several international Esperanto organisations, for example the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA). The international staff at its headquarters in Rotterdam naturally use Esperanto as their corporate language. In addition, there are several independent Esperanto publishers, travel agencies and other small companies that offer their services in various languages including Esperanto. For the most part, however, Esperanto is associated with the private sphere of its users, their leisure activities and related domains.

Nowadays, the Esperanto speech community is mainly active in Europe, but has local centres in the United States, Brazil, China, and Japan. The Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) has individual members in more than 120 countries and about seventy affiliated national Esperanto organisations. The speech community is very heterogeneous in terms of sociological categories and ideology. The majority of speakers, however, identify with Esperanto as an equitable means of communication, peacefully uniting people irrespective of their origin, race, sex, age, religion, or language, goals which are related to Zamenhof's original motivation (generally called Esperanto's 'inherent idea', *Interna Ideo*). In addition, proficient speakers

share the culture of the community formed by its artistic products (especially literary works), achievements (such as the support for Esperanto by UNESCO resolutions), and its crises (such as the Ido schism and the persecution of speakers in totalitarian regimes). Consciousness of the language's 130-year communicative history is an important constituent of their identity.