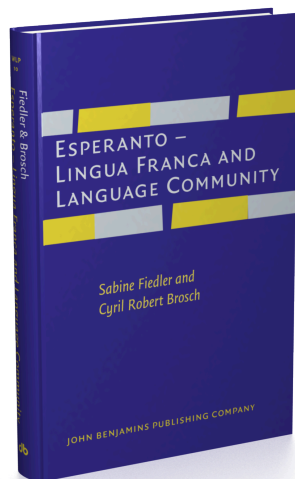


Esperanto as a family language and the phenomenon of Esperanto “native speakers”

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/wlp.10.c10>

 Available under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.



Pages 53–58 of

Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

Sabine Fiedler and Cyril Robert Brosch

[*Studies in World Language Problems*, 10]

2022. xx, 429 pp.

© John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way. For any reuse of this material, beyond the permissions granted by the Open Access license, written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

For further information, please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website at benjamins.com/rights

Esperanto as a family language and the phenomenon of Esperanto “native speakers”

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Esperanto is in active use in various domains of communication despite the fact that its speakers do not live together in a specific territory. There is no “Esperantoland”, but Esperanto speakers regard their community as *Esperantujo*/*Esperantio* (using one of the two suffixes for the formation of the names of countries: *-uj* or *-i*), especially when its life manifests itself at meetings and other common activities, where the following farewell can often be heard: *Ni renkontiĝos ie iam en Esperantujo* (‘We’ll meet [again] somewhere sometime in Esperantoland’).

Whilst the various meetings mostly bring together speakers only for a short time, since the early days of the language some people have found their life-partners during such encounters. When these couples decide to live together and one partner moves to the other’s home country, Esperanto can find itself in a new role: it is adopted as a family language. This phenomenon has even given rise to a set phrase, *Esperanto – edzperanto* (‘Esperanto – husband/wife provider / matchmaker’) (see Fiedler 2015d, p. 255). Out of the thirty participants in our interview study, which is a part of the dataset for this venture (see “interview” in Appendix 1), no fewer than fourteen met their present or a previous partner through Esperanto, and thirteen mentioned that they used Esperanto as (one of) their language(s) in the home.³⁶

This use of Esperanto has not triggered scholarly interest so far (for an exception see Brosch, 2018) – especially when compared with the popularity that the use of English as a lingua franca between couples has enjoyed (see, for example, Gundacker, 2010; Klötzl, 2013, and Pietikäinen, 2014). There are, however, a few studies on the use of the language by children who are born to these couples and

36. The following passage from an interview with a Hungarian woman living in a Dutch environment with her French-speaking husband provides insight into the special role that Esperanto played in their marriage: “Mi devas diri, kiam mia edzo, pro tio, ke li estas enprofundiĝanta en iu laboro en la franca aŭ en la nederlanda, alparolas al mi en la nederlanda aŭ franca, mi komprenas ĉion, sed mi estas ofendita. Do, mi ne sentas, ke li estas tute kun mi” [I have to say that, when my husband is sunk in thought during some work in French or Dutch and starts talking to me in French or Dutch, I understand everything, but I am upset. Because, I don’t feel he is entirely with me.] [64 (hun; int; -) 25: 21–41].

subsequently raised with Esperanto as a first language.³⁷ These include research by Versteegh (1993), Corsetti (1996), Bergen (2001), Corsetti et al. (2004), Lindstedt (2006, 2010, 2016), Sakaguchi (2006), Fischer (2011), and Fiedler (2012). In addition, a number of studies conducted by Esperanto speakers (Butler, 1921; Csiszár, 1995; Csiszár-Salomon, 2009; Golden, 1991; Košecký, 1996; Miner, 2010) are no less important contributions to the research in this field, though they are only rarely taken into account outside the speech community because of the language barrier.

Most of these studies approach nativisation in Esperanto from a sociolinguistic perspective, which is also our focus here. Linguistically oriented research, i.e. studies exploring the process of L1³⁸ acquisition with Esperanto, is rarely found. The few studies that do exist are often based on analysis of the diaries kept by Esperanto-speaking parents (e.g. Brosch, 2019; Corsetti, 1996; Sakaguchi, 2006; Vaha, 1996). An exception is Bergen (2001), whose study has received considerable attention from language acquisition scholars (see, for example, Wray & Grace, 2007). He uses a rather small sample, however, and has been criticised by Lindstedt (2006, 2016) for a number of mistakes related to his insufficient familiarity with Esperanto suffixes and his lack of experience with different influences on Esperanto speakers.

As several book-length publications testify (see, for example, Bonfiglio, 2010; Coulmas, 1981; Davies, 2003), it is surprisingly difficult to define the notion of a “native or mother tongue speaker”. In his effort to provide a detailed description, Davies (2003, pp. 210f.), at the end of his book, lists six features that he proposes as characteristics of a typical native (L1) speaker:

1. The native speaker acquires the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker in childhood.
2. The native speaker has intuitions (in terms of acceptability and productiveness) about his/her Grammar 1.
3. The native speaker has intuitions about those features of the Grammar 2 which are distinct from his/her Grammar 1.
4. The native speaker has a unique capacity to produce fluent spontaneous discourse, which exhibits pauses mainly at clause boundaries [...] and which is facilitated by a huge memory stock of complete lexical items [...]. In both production and comprehension the native speaker exhibits a wide range of communicative competence.
5. The native speaker has a unique capacity to write creatively (and this includes, of course, literature at all levels from jokes to epics, metaphor to novels).
6. The native speaker has a unique capacity to interpret and translate into the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker. Disagreements about an individual's capacity are likely to stem from a dispute about the Standard or (standard) Language.

37. For general literature on multilingual first language acquisition see Genesee & Nicoladis (2009), Meisel (2019), and Wright et al. (2017).

38. In accordance with the majority of authors in language acquisition, we use L1 to refer to “first language/native language” and L2 to “second/foreign language”.

Interestingly enough, Davies adds that all these qualities, with the exception of the first criterion (exposure during early childhood), can in principle be accomplished by L2 speakers, too, if the conditions are sufficiently good – which is “possible but difficult and rare” (p. 215). For this reason, Davies (2003, pp. 212–214) comes to the conclusion that the main differences between L1 and L2 speakers are psycholinguistic rather than objective in nature. They are based on power relations and social ascriptions of identity: “[...] [T]he fundamental opposition is one of power and [...] in the event membership is determined by the non-native speaker’s assumption of confidence and of identity.” (p. 215)

While this intriguing topic deserves a much more detailed account, for the needs of the present chapter it should suffice to define “mother tongue / L1” as any language that a child acquires from birth by means of exposure to the language and personal interaction with one or more speakers of the language (typically his/her parent), as opposed to learning it later in life by means of formal education, and that as a result of this early acquisition the child becomes a native speaker of the given language. Taking this definition as a point of departure, it can rightly be said that Esperanto has also become a mother tongue.³⁹ For none of its speakers is it the only L1, of course, as Esperanto speakers are at least bilingual. In Esperanto, a mother tongue speaker of this language is usually referred to as a *denaskulo* (*de-nask-ul-* ‘from-birth-person-’), which is a short form of *denaska Esperantisto* (‘Esperanto speaker from birth’). We will consistently use *denaskulo* (plural: *denaskuloj*) here and throughout this book to refer to native Esperanto speakers, in accordance with previous studies (Fiedler, 2012; Versteegh, 1993). This formal distinction has the function of highlighting the principal differences between native speakers of an ethnic language and children who are raised with Esperanto. One of those – the fact that in the case of Esperanto children grow up with a non-dominant native language among others, such as the language(s) of their parent(s) and the language of their environment – has just been mentioned, and further differences will be addressed over the course of this chapter. It may be useful, first, to describe the history, scope and organisational structure of the phenomenon in more detail.

Although, because of varying information from different sources,⁴⁰ we are not totally sure about the earliest case of a child growing up with Esperanto, it seems safe to say that the phenomenon is not recent, but began as early as about fifteen

39. As the title of Corsetti’s (1996) paper reveals, it is primarily fathers who speak Esperanto with their children.

40. Wikipedia mentions 1904 as a starting point, citing the moment when Emilio Gaston, from Spain, began teaching his children in Esperanto. There are, however, no linguistic data available from this time. From an article by Esperantina Grażyna Mirska, we learn about an Esperanto-speaking family in the fourth generation in Poland (Mirska, 2016, p. 156).

years after the language itself came into being. The first case study is of a family in Czechoslovakia in 1919, to which Golden (1991) refers. The linguistic development of three children of Montague C. Butler, a renowned British Esperantist, is well documented (Butler, 1921). The use of Esperanto as a native language is increasing. In 1957, 154 children in nineteen countries were reported as growing up with Esperanto (Corsetti, 1996, p. 265). Corsetti refers to 285 registered families in January 1995, but estimates the actual number to be considerably higher. In their 2004 article, Corsetti, Pinto and Tolomeo raise the number to 2,000 children and cite the fact that *denaskuloj* can be found above all in Europe. It is known that about half of them give up the language when they are able to decide for themselves, usually in their adolescence (Papaloïzos, 1992). This phenomenon is not unusual, also occurring with regard to minority languages under the pressure of a surrounding majority language (see, for example, Caldas & Caron-Caldas (2002), on the peer pressure on English-French bilingual teenagers). Esperanto is particularly affected by the problems that small, low-prestige languages have in acquiring appropriate material for children (books, games, films) or the negative reactions voiced to a “useless additional language” (see Corsetti, 1996, p. 267).

For families with *denaskuloj*, *Rondo Familia* (‘family circle’) was established in 1995 as a special interest group within the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA), together with an email list, which serves especially practical purposes. In November 2018, there were 236 registered email addresses on this list.⁴¹ Also, most Internet resources (e.g. a wiki) are of a practical nature, enabling parents to share educational advice and material (often home-made PDF books, songs, nursery rhymes, etc.).

As for children’s language acquisition, contact with peers is of the utmost importance, and regular meetings of Esperanto families are organised in various places in Europe. REF (*Renkontiĝo de Esperantaj Familioj* ‘meeting of Esperanto families’) is a well-established event that takes place during the summer holidays; in July 2018 it was attended by twenty families with seventy-five participants in total.⁴² Other meetings, such as an Easter holiday meeting, PSI (*Printempa Semajno Internacia* ‘international springtime week’) in Germany, and a meeting at the end of the year, NR (*Novjara Renkontiĝo* ‘New Year’s meeting’), attract up to 200 attendants, a third of whom are children and teenagers (but not necessarily *denaskuloj*). Beside these events, the creation of opportunities for encounters among *denaskuloj* depends heavily on their parents’ initiative, but in recent years video messaging software such as Skype has created new possibilities for direct contact.

41. Confirmed by a personal message from the administrator [18 Nov 2018].

42. Personal message of one of the organisers [17 Nov 2018].

It is noteworthy that the use of Esperanto as a mother tongue is found not only in international families. According to Guráň and Filadelfiová (1996, p. 39) 61%, and to Corsetti (1996, p. 266) even about two thirds of the *denaskuloj* have parents belonging to the same nationality (see also Csiszár-Salomon 2009, p. 318). This fact sheds light on the character of the speech community, and especially on questions of language loyalty and speaker identity. It shows that the planned language “holds a high position in a scale of values”, a position that is worth defending and needs to be defended, as Weinreich (1977, p. 131) expressed in his definition of language loyalty (*Sprachloyalität*). To its speakers, Esperanto is not only a means of communication, but an instrument to pass on cultural values that those speakers want to maintain and disseminate. Here again, there are parallels between Esperanto speakers and members of linguistic minorities (Fiedler, 1999, p. 163; Kimura, 2010, 2012).

Denaskuloj are “invisible” in the second-language community of Esperanto. This is not only due to their numerical disadvantage. They can hardly be identified on the basis of linguistic criteria. True, *denaskuloj* often naturally speak faster and react more spontaneously than other speakers. But there are no sounds in this language whose production needs to be acquired in early childhood, and accents resulting from speakers’ mother tongues are considered to be normal and are generally tolerated in the speech community (see Chapter 24). Therefore, Esperanto can be learned successfully by adults, and experience shows that good L2 speakers of Esperanto can surpass the linguistic level of a *denaskulo*.

Csiszár-Salomon (2009, pp. 318–319), a native Esperanto speaker, points out the following:

Laŭ mia opinio la fakton, ke Esperanto estas “bona internacia lingvo” pruvas ĝusteco, ke dum internaciaj aranĝoj oni ne povas rimarki la denaskajn parolantojn de la lingvo, ĉar ankaŭ nendenaskaj lingvolernantoj povas akiri saman, aŭ eĉ pli bonan nivelon ol denaskuloj.

[In my opinion, the quality of Esperanto as a ‘good international language’ can be proven in particular by the fact that at international meetings native speakers of the language are not noticed, because non-native speakers can acquire the same or even greater proficiency than native speakers.]

The fact that *denaskuloj* do not provide the criterion of linguistic adequacy can be illustrated by language practices adopted in the speech community. While it is common in ethnic languages to have language in publications checked by native speakers, it would not occur to Esperanto authors to look for a native speaker of the planned language to proofread their texts. Of course, texts must be checked for correctness. For this task, however, experienced speakers or representatives of a different mother tongue might be relevant consultants to avoid mother tongue interference (Germanisms, Russianisms etc.). As *denaskuloj* do not hold a prestigious

status in the community (Lindstedt, 2010, p. 73), feelings of insecurity or inferiority in relation to native speakers, which are reported in the use of other languages (Beyene et al., 2009; Flowerdew, 2007; Švelch, 2015), are hardly known in Esperanto.

We have dealt with this topic in such detail here because of our experience that these differences in status between a native speaker of an ethnic language and a native speaker of Esperanto are often ignored in discussions of the role of a planned language (Fiedler, 2015a). People who are not familiar with Esperanto start from their knowledge of the position of native speakers in ethnic languages, arguing that a language can be neither efficient nor expressive if it has no native speakers, or only a small number of them. In Esperanto, communicative ability, expressiveness and naturalness cannot be equated with nativeness. Innovation and creativity as well as language change emanate from L2 speakers in the Esperanto speech community (Lindstedt, 2016), as the following chapters of this book will illustrate.