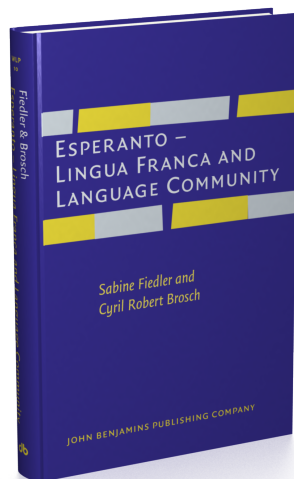


The speakers of Esperanto and their culture

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Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

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The speakers of Esperanto and their culture

We started this book with a conversation between people having lunch together at a restaurant and described it as a typical example of Esperanto interaction, as, among other things, it contained allusions to Esperanto culture and showed that the participants' shared knowledge of this culture made the conversation successful. The chapters that followed included a large number of similar excerpts from Esperanto encounters that were, in one way or another, related to people, events and concepts rooted in the communicative history of Esperanto and likely to be known to Esperanto speakers. Such phenomena are generally referred to as the culture of a speech community. The fact that planned languages can have a distinctive culture of their own is often disputed, however – which is the reason why it seems appropriate to deal with this topic in more detail here in our book's conclusion.

From an anthropological perspective, culture encompasses – in addition to art and literature – ideas, attitudes, beliefs and values, conventions and patterns of behaviour, ways of living together, as well as conceptions embodied in and transmitted by symbols (Geertz, 1973; Goodenough, 1970; Reagan, 2009). It is on the basis of these factors that members of a community develop a sense of belonging and participation: in other words, an identity of their own. Such an identity as an Esperanto speaker is, of course, only one among others (e.g. speakers' national, social, gender or professional identities). Identities are not only plural and multi-layered, but change over time: it is increasingly accepted that they are continually constructed rather than pre-existent (Dervin & Risager, 2015) and that they emerge in communication contexts (Fassett & Warren, 2007). The characteristics of communication described in this book mirror Esperanto speakers' attitudes. They use metacommunication in order to secure understanding and facilitate interactions (see Chapter 18). Speakers' inclination to insist on linguistic correctness points to their awareness of the key role of a stable linguistic norm (see Chapter 19), and the tendency not to code-switch but to prefer endogenous means of word formation over direct borrowing show speakers' motivation to prove that their language is a fully fledged means of communication allowing them to be expressive without relying on other-language material (see Chapter 22).

Our study confirms for Esperanto what we have known for a long time of ethnic languages: language and culture are inextricably linked, and some knowledge of a language's cultural context is necessary to communicate successfully. References to

Esperanto artefacts and life in the community are ubiquitous in the speech events we have analysed, independent of genre. The existence of an Esperanto-specific phraseology (Chapter 21) and the fact that humour is largely based on culture-bound phenomena (such as Esperanto's literature, traditional events, and institutions) illustrate this. Most of the language's phraseology is international, however, originating as it does from common sources and the speakers' multicultural backgrounds; and the metaphors dominantly used refer to general human experience (see Chapter 21). In this way, it is evident that Esperanto culture is a combination of the culturally specific and the universal. Esperanto is an "intercultural language" (Schubert, 2004) uniting speakers of very different linguo-cultural backgrounds in their endeavour to communicate beyond language borders and to learn about other cultures. The acceptance of foreign accents (see Chapter 24) and the large variety of source languages in literary translation (see Chapter 9) are also indicative of the international character of Esperanto's culture.

At several points in this book, we have referred to the heterogeneous character of the Esperanto speech community. It is indeed difficult to overstate this fact. The differences between Esperanto speakers concern not only people's language proficiency, but also their ideological positions, in the sense of whether they prefer to identify with Esperanto as a movement, or as a self-sufficient linguistic minority which has managed to produce a culture of its own that is internationally valuable (see Chapter 8) and has possibly changed attitudes towards multilingualism (see Chapter 3 and Example (327) in Chapter 22.2). In addition, since culture is a collective phenomenon and no single member of such a community possesses complete cultural knowledge of the group, individual speakers might differ regarding the extent to which they have acquired the culture of Esperanto. According to our experience, however, and from what can be inferred from the character of the communication presented in this book, the average Esperanto speaker is familiar with the life and history of the speech community. There is much need for sociological research in this area.

There is one aspect, however, which unites all Esperanto speakers and constitutes a major part of their identity. This is their practical experience of successful communication by means of the planned language, to which the final section of this book is devoted.