

Language “ownership”

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Esperanto – Lingua Franca and Language Community

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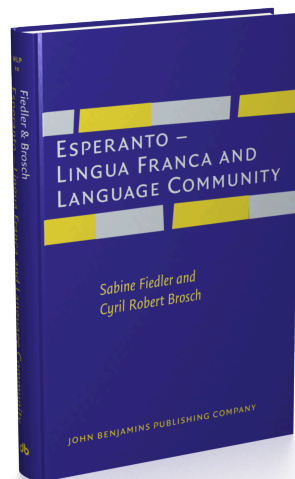
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Language “ownership”

Our study has shown that Esperanto functions successfully as a *lingua franca* among those who have made the conscious decision to use it. Although it is perhaps not as easy to learn as some people believe or claim it to be (see especially Chapter 19 on repair work), the more than 400 examples of authentic language use in this book have clearly demonstrated that Esperanto allows its speakers to be productive and expressive, creative and humorous, to degrees that are rare in the use of a foreign language. Esperanto speakers are self-confident and independent practitioners, obeying linguistic norms, but they do so without ever needing to ask themselves, “What would a native speaker say?”

This advantage is mainly psychological in nature, as Edward Sapir argued as early as 1931:

The attitude of independence toward a constructed language which all national speakers must adopt is really a great advantage, because it tends to make man see himself as the master of language instead of its obedient servant. [...] A further psychological advantage of a constructed language has been often referred to by those who have had experience with such languages as Esperanto. This is the removal of fear in the public use of a language other than one's native tongue. The use of the wrong gender in French or any minor violence to English idiom is construed as a sin of etiquette, and everyone knows how paralyzing on freedom of expression is the fear of committing the slightest breach of etiquette. [...] Expression in a constructed language has no such fears as these to reckon with.

(Sapir, 1931, pp. 119f.)

This aspect of using a foreign language as an adaptable resource has been discussed in the context of English as a *lingua franca* under the headline of “language ownership” (see, for example, Widdowson's 1994 article “The ownership of English”; see also Norton, 1997). It is perhaps debatable whether this term, normally associated with the possession and control of material goods, fits a discussion of linguistic communication and especially *lingua franca* communication. We adopt it here as it is useful for illustrating one of the basic differences between English as a *lingua franca* and Esperanto. According to Widdowson (1994, p. 384), ownership of a language means “that the language has been learned, not just as a set of fixed conventions to conform to, but as an adaptable resource for making meaning” and that “[y]ou are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your

own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form”. With the growing use of English, this kind of ownership, Widdowson argues, can also be claimed by non-native speakers: “How English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England, the United States, or anywhere else. They have no say in the matter, no right to intervene or pass judgement. They are irrelevant” (p. 385). While we find such an extreme claim implausible, the idea of the changing position of the English language learner and user from “defective communicator” to self-confident member of the speech community (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 213) is an enticing goal that deserves support. “Non-native users of English should be acknowledged as legitimate, not merely second-class users of the language,” as Haberland (2011, p. 948) states. Reality often looks different, as both research and practical experience tell us. In Chapter 21.8, we mentioned Prodromou’s test with the idiomatic phrase *bump into sth.* and its different acceptance depending on whether people believed it to have been used by a native or non-native speaker of English. English as a lingua franca cannot be seen as fully detached from ordinary English, and learners of the language continue to be judged by the norm-providing first-language users, especially in written communication, with the result that ELF often looks like a re-labelling of ordinary English only (see Gazzola & Grin’s 2013 criticism from a linguo-political and economic position, Gnutzmann’s 2007 discussion from a didactic point of view and de Schutter’s 2018 argumentation from a philosophical perspective). As a consequence, there can be no question of non-native speakers “bending the language to their own will” to use Widdowson’s 1994 wording; on the contrary, as recent studies have shown, for example in science, non-native users apply techniques such as “language re-use” (i.e. copying fragments of previously published texts) in their desire to meet linguistic requirements (Flowerdew, 2007, see also Gnutzmann & Rabe, 2014a). Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of legitimacy, we can conclude that Esperanto speakers feel like legitimate speakers of the language.

We dwelled on ELF here because the position of Esperanto speakers becomes evident by comparison. The speakers of the planned language whose communication we analysed for this study used and use it creatively. They exploited and exploit its structures to the full, as we have seen, to express themselves, for humorous purposes (see Chapter 20) as well as for criticism (see Chapter 20.4.1, [203]), and in a form that has to be linguistically correct but is independent of native-speaker models. This makes it possible to put communication on an equal footing by means of a lingua franca, and it might be the reason why many speakers refuse the term “foreign language” as a designation for Esperanto (see Chapter 21.8 footnote 137).