

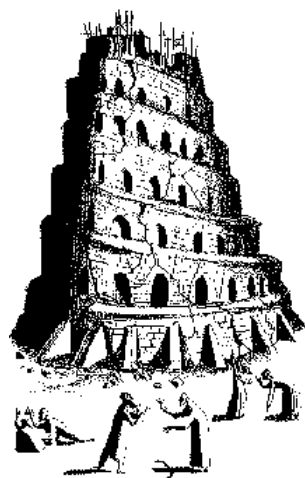
## Esperanto? What is that?

Esperanto was proposed in 1887 as a neutral international language by Dr. L. L. Zamenhof, a Jewish ophthalmologist living in the (now Polish) western part of the Russian Empire. His aim was to develop an easily accessible, regular language and try it out with colleagues, so that it might eventually be introduced as an international second language for everybody. Such a language is usually called a "constructed" (sometimes "artificial" or "auxiliary") language. It is neutral in the sense that it is not associated with a particular country or nationality. Zamenhof considered a neutral language, one that would belong to all equally, to be not only a practical matter,

but a way to resolve conflicts and promote peace as well.

Esperanto has actually achieved *one* initial breakthrough: it has become a living language that spans generations and which hundreds of thousands throughout the world have learned. Some of them have joined organised groups. The largest worldwide Esperanto organisation (UEA=*Universala Esperanto-Asocio*) has 18,002 members in 114 countries (2004). The smaller World Anational Association SAT (= *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda*) has around 1000 members. It is a meeting place for left-wing (mainly socialist, anarchist and antinational-

ist), trade-unionist and ecologically active Esperanto speakers. Esperanto continuously demonstrates its viability. It provides many practical services to its speakers.



## Language for the World or Language for a Voluntary Speech Community?

For the past two decades or so, some speakers of Esperanto have been disputing about whether the classical aim to have Esperanto introduced as the main medium of international communication is realistic in our time. One group of non-traditionalists doesn't believe that it is, and stresses instead the cultural and ideal value that Esperanto has for its community of voluntary users at present. Advocates of the traditional aim, on the other hand, make the point that future events are never easy to predict, and that it is not even possible for an ethnic language to really solve the world-wide language problem in a satisfactory way, because the peoples that

would be disadvantaged by the choice of language would never acquiesce to being discriminated in such a manner.

The world dominance of just a few languages derives primarily from the power of the states that use them. Members of non-privileged linguistic communities communicate "uphill" – to the extent they even have a command of one or more hegemonistic languages. Those that don't know any "major" language are for the most part excluded from international communication and are therefore placed at an even greater disadvantage.

International use of just a few national languages distorts cultural exchanges and

skews the flow of information in favour of the economic, political and opinion-making elites in the linguistically privileged countries. A world culture "from below" has a hard time developing if English is the medium of cultural exchange, because most of the world's people do not know it well enough, if they do at all. An easier-to-learn and neutral language could remedy this situation by creating more equity and balance.

While some people are fatalistic about the language problem, some profit from it, because their personal command of foreign languages is a career asset or a source of prestige. But it is especially the ruling classes of many countries that have every reason to maintain the status quo. It is very much in their interest that the working masses and generally most of the populace remain monolingual or have only limited proficiency in foreign languages, because that way they have less direct access to opinions and information from abroad that haven't passed through the filter of the domestic mass media that are dominated by those ruling classes, just as they have less direct exchange with their social counterparts in foreign countries.

## ***The Anational Language***

In the milieu of the fervently anti-nationalist workers' Esperanto movement, Eugeno Lanti, co-founder of SAT, even before World War II began to advocate "anationalism" – a cosmopolitan conception that dealt with the de-nationalisation of world society. His hypothesis was that the practice of Esperanto was planting the seed of a future anational (*anational* = free of national or ethnic connection, or to use a more modern term, *postethnic*) world culture. He disseminated this emphatically cosmopolitan anationalism among worker Esperantists, calling on them to abstain from national struggles and push forward in class struggle.

"Globalisation from below", a concept frequently brought up lately and an answer to relentless capitalist globalisation from above, can only be put into practice by people who can talk to each another.

The very concept of Esperanto is egalitarian. It was meant to enable broad strata of society in all countries to communicate directly over and beyond linguistic and political boundaries. English, thought by many to be *the* de facto world language, fails to do this job even in the small group of comparatively wealthy nations with developed systems of public education.

Use of national languages on the international plane is costly in monetary terms. The EU alone has to spend thousands of millions of euros for this purpose annually. The same situation prevails at the UN and in other international organisations.

Supporters of the classical demand for world-wide introduction of Esperanto regard it as a potential aid to the democratic resolution of conflicts. Practically all speakers, including supporters of the non-traditional tendency, see it as a means of achieving equal communication rights, be it on a large or a small scale.

Among the groups represented within the proletarian Esperanto movement, the anationalists in some places had a perceptible role of their own within the general workers' movement. Ideas about "grass-roots globalisation" abound these days too. A few Esperanto speakers – some of them members of SAT – mount opposition to the resurfacing ethnicity cult, identity politics, language nationalism, European nationalism, etc. Not the least of their motivations is the fact that there are unfortunately quite a few Esperanto-speakers that adhere to such views.

## Is Esperanto Getting Anywhere?

The community of speakers in Europe is stable, while it has grown substantially over the last few decades in some areas outside of Europe (China, Iran, Africa). Esperanto has received a greater measure of official recognition than is commonly known, though not nearly enough to have it introduced throughout the world as a universally used second language. In 1954 a UNESCO resolution acknowledged "the results attained by Esperanto in the field of international intellectual relations and in the rapprochement of the peoples of the world". The Universal Esperanto Association received consultative status at UNESCO the following year. Since then it collaborates with other non-governmental organisations in a number of UNESCO working groups. That organisation reasserted its position in 1985 and recommended that the language problem and Esperanto be given more attention in schools and universities of the member-states.

Members of the European Parliament have occasionally demanded that the suitability of Esperanto as a language for the European Union be investigated. Some

countries have conferred Esperanto the status of an elective subject in schools. Some universities offer courses in and about Esperanto, for example the Universities of Budapest and Poznań. At the Berlin Humboldt University there are regular lectures on interlinguistics and esperantology. Local authorities in a few countries publish tourist and other information in Esperanto, while international broadcasting services in several countries broadcast daily or weekly Esperanto programs on short-wave and by satellite.

Whether Esperanto is ever given a chance to function internationally on a large scale depends both on the advancement of international co-operation and on public pressure being brought to bear in many countries simultaneously, a development likely to occur only in a political climate characterised by radical democratic and internationalist strivings, as well as by social and global egalitarianism.

*Regardless of the uncertainty of Esperanto ever being pushed through politically, as a language it has for many decades proved viable and capable of continuously attracting new users.*

## A Functioning Language

Esperanto can be learned in around a third of the time needed to learn the most commonly studied foreign languages. It is written phonemically (one sound = one letter) and has a very regular grammar. Its phonology is as international as possible. Spoken Esperanto sounds a little like Spanish or Italian.

Esperanto is an agglutinating language, in which a large amount of vocabulary is compounded from smaller elements. This reduces the number of lexical elements that need to be learned separately. Items of vocabulary were selected in accordance with the principle of maximum international familiarity.

A language suited to all purposes can only develop in a collective process. For almost 100 years congresses and informal meetings have been held, at which Esperanto is spoken. There are tens of thousands of books and several hundred regularly published, albeit often small periodicals in Esperanto. Esperanto frequently becomes the everyday family language for couples of different origin (and their children).

Esperanto evolves just as other languages do – by borrowing lexical items and forging new vocabulary from its own resources, yet it does not lose its relative simplicity and regularity.

## A Sample Text

*La spirita kontaktiĝo inter la diverslandaj proletoj fakte okazas nur pere de poliglotaĵaj intelektuloj. Tial la agado de SAT, celanta kunigi, intimigi senpere la laborulojn tutmondajn, estas esence revolucia.*

Intellectual contacts between proletarians of various countries takes place in reality only *through the medium* of polyglot intellectuals. The activity of SAT, which aims to unite the working people of the world and bring them together *directly*, is revolutionary *in its essence*.

Eŭgeno Lanti: *Pensoj*

## Many Put Esperanto to Practical Use

Many have made world-wide contacts through Esperanto in return for a modest investment of time to learn it. Some become active in specialised organisations, local, national and international groups. Most Esperanto-speakers emphasise the practical aspects more than the political: they use their language skills on vacation trips, by contacting acquaintances or making new contacts through one of the address books such as the

popular *Pasporta Servo*, which contains the addresses of 1364 people in 89 countries who are willing to lodge travelling or vacationing Esperanto-speakers for a limited time. There are dozens of international meetings, conferences and recreational activities the year round, often dealing with social, political and cultural questions of current interest.

[edited by Gary Mickle]

### Information in English may be requested from:

SATEB (Workers' Esperanto Movement of Great Britain),  
e-mail: [arturo@signalprent.demon.co.uk](mailto:arturo@signalprent.demon.co.uk) or from G. Mickle, Brüsseler Str. 6,  
DE-13353 Berlin (Germany), e-mail: [gmickle@nexgo.de](mailto:gmickle@nexgo.de)

### Information on the Web:

- SATEB: <http://www.geocities.com/satebejo/index.html>
- Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda / World Anational Association (SAT):  
<http://satesperanto.free.fr/>
- Multilingual Esperanto Information Centre: <http://www.esperanto.net>
- Lernu! (instructional material, dictionaries): <http://www.lernu.net/>
- Maldekstra Forumo Berlino / Berlin Left Forum:  
<http://home.arcor.de/gmickle/mfb/>
- SAT-Amikaro: <http://satamikarohm.free.fr/>
- Freier Esperanto-Bund: <http://home.arcor.de/gmickle/leag/>
- SAT-Kulturo: <http://satesperanto.free.fr/satkulturo/>
- Universal Esperanto-Association (UEA): <http://www.uea.org>
- World Organisation of Esperanto Youth (TEJO): <http://www.tejo.org/>