

Esperanto and Anarchism

Will Firth

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I. Definition

The international language Esperanto is an auxiliary language that was conceived and developed for international communication. Of around 1,000 known plans for auxiliary languages, Esperanto alone has proved its worth in over 100 years of practical use.

In July 1887 the young Jewish ophthalmologist Lazarus Ludwig Zamenhof (1859–1917) published his textbook with exercises for the “Internacia Lingvo” in Warsaw under the pseudonym “Dr Esperanto” and under the vigilant eye of distrustful tsarist censors. The book was in Russian and was followed that same year by editions in Polish, French and German. In Zamenhof’s “International Language” Esperanto means “one who hopes”, and Zamenhof hoped that by creating the international language he would contribute to the cause of international understanding and world peace. The word Esperanto soon became the name of the language.

Esperanto is relatively easy to learn due to its regularity and flexibility. It has phonemic orthography, i.e. a one-to-one relationship between writing and pronunciation. Its spelling is regular. Its grammar is almost free of exceptions; versatile prefixes and suffixes contribute to the language’s high precision and expressiveness. Its vocabulary consists primarily of Romanic and Germanic roots that are widespread in many languages. When people hear Esperanto spoken, their impression is usually that it sounds like Italian or Spanish. While it is true that the European origin of its vocabulary makes Esperanto more difficult for Chinese, for example, than for English-speakers, the Chinese nevertheless find Esperanto fairly easy, certainly much more so than English. The reason is that extensive use is made of compounds and derivatives, the meaning of which is easy to determine because derivational word elements (morphemes) are attached to the word-root without it changing. This “agglutinating” characteristic is a formative feature in the Turkic languages, among others. English, for its part, belongs to the inflectional languages, in which the root of a word is not immutable (e.g. foot – feet; swim – swam – swum).

Today the loosely interconnected community of Esperanto-speakers has upwards of a million members. There are tens of thousands of books in Esperanto (chiefly original literature) and several hundred mostly small periodicals that appear regularly, of which many are circulated worldwide. Hardly a day passes without international meetings such as those of specialised organisations, conferences, youth get-togethers, seminars, group holidays and regional meetings taking place throughout the world. Also, several radio stations broadcast programs in Esperanto, some even on a daily basis. Esperanto sometimes becomes the “family language” for couples of different origins, and their children speak it as a native language (along with the language of their country of residence and in some cases another language). Esperanto develops and adapts to the changing needs of its speech community just as any other living language does – both through lexical borrowing and the coining of terms from existing linguistic resources – without losing its relative simplicity. This is because the semantic differentiation and expressiveness that a language enables are not contingent upon its particular historic origins or upon immanent linguistic factors, but arise exclusively from the communicative needs of the speech community.

Some terms commonly used with reference to Esperanto are “auxiliary language” and “artificial language”. For those unfamiliar with the actual extent of the practical use to which Esperanto is put, these terms sometimes give rise to the erroneous idea that such a language must be primitive and impoverished, of no more substance than what the intellectual capacity of its “creator” was able to impart to it and such as might fit between the covers of a single book. Yet as most Esperanto-speakers have been aware right from the beginning, a language suited for all human

communicative needs can only develop through a collective process. Esperanto did not arise “out of nothing” any more than Haitian Creole, for example. A language comes into being when a need for it is felt.

II. The Place of Esperanto in the History of Ideas

1. General Remarks

Along with Esperanto, Zamenhof advocated a quasi-religious doctrine called “homaranism” [which literally means the doctrine of seeing oneself as a member of the human race], which he associated with Esperanto. This rather diffuse concept is grounded in liberal and humanistic thinking, e.g. the idea that all humanity is “a family” that must find itself; or the idea that all “world religions” have a common origin and can be brought into harmony with one another. While some Esperanto-speakers find this interesting and interpret it in different ways, many others derive little inspiration from Zamenhof’s “love of humanity”.

After the publication of the language project in 1887 in Warsaw, Esperanto spread very rapidly, in the beginning mainly within the Russian Empire. One of the first literary works in the new language (alongside Zamenhof’s own vigorous literary and translation activity) was *En la tombo* [In the Grave] by Nikolai Borovko, written in 1892, which describes the torments of a man buried alive. The Christian anarchist Leo Tolstoy spoke out firmly in favour of Esperanto. This “Russian period” came to an abrupt end in 1895, when the only Esperanto periodical published an article by Tolstoy, which led to its prohibition by tsarist censorship. The subsequent “French period” saw the holding of the first international Esperanto congress in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1905 (with 688 participants from 20 countries). On this occasion Zamenhof officially withdrew from his position as the driving force of the movement: from that point on, the Esperanto movement was to manage itself.

In 1905 the anarchist Paul Berthelot founded the monthly magazine *Esperanto*, which appears to this day. In 1908 Hector Hodler founded the *Universala Esperanto-Asocio* [UEA, the Universal Esperanto Association], which still conjoins the activities of most Esperanto organisations in the world. UEA headquarters is in Rotterdam.

By World War I, Esperanto had developed a sizeable following in France. From there it was able to spread to far-flung parts of the world, especially Japan and China. In 1921 a movement that used Esperanto and had emancipative aims and an anational structure was founded in Prague following a proposal by Eugène Adam (Lanti): the *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda* [SAT = World Anational Association], which has done much to extend the socio-cultural base of the language. SAT has its headquarters in Paris. (See II. 2. “Esperanto and Anarchism”.)

The blossoming of Esperanto that followed lasted 10 to 15 years, depending on the conditions that prevailed in the particular countries: there was a pronounced “Hungarian phase”, which made Budapest the “cultural capital of Esperanto”¹ for a few years. But the ascendance of totalitarian and militaristic regimes, which led to World War II and thereafter to the Cold War, put an end to the boom for many decades. After the war especially, the expansionism of Anglo-American language and culture was at its height, and Esperanto enjoyed less public attention.

¹ Spomenka Štimec, Tibor Sekelj, *Pioniro de la dua jarcento*, Vienna 1989.

For the first time in 1954, and once again in 1985, the Assembly of UNESCO recognised the value of Esperanto for international intellectual exchange. In September 1993 the World Congress of the writers' association PEN accepted the Esperanto PEN Centre (authors who use Esperanto) as a member, thus marking Esperanto's recognition as a literary language.

The worldwide dissemination of Esperanto is not balanced: despite progress in the last few years, it is barely present in many countries of Africa and Asia. The majority of Esperanto-speakers live in Europe. Whether Esperanto is "eurocentric" by virtue of this fact is a subject of rather frequent discussions within the Esperanto movement, but the true international character of Esperanto does not allow for it to be considered purely European. Its development in a few countries (China, Iran, Togo, Congo — the former Zaire) has been truly phenomenal at times, while on the other hand there are other countries that still have no organised Esperanto movement.

An especially active role within the Esperanto movement has been played by TEJO, the UEA youth organisation. Like the Universal Esperanto Association UEA, it organises annual congresses and numerous other meetings. (The "International Seminars" held by the German Esperanto Youth in the week around New Year's Day are especially worthy of mention).

One of Esperanto's current developmental trends is "raŭmismo" (a term derived from the name of the Finnish city Rauma where a TEJO congress was held in 1980). "Raŭmismo" sees Esperanto-speakers as a kind of "people in diaspora" and strives to create cultural values (e.g. literature) through Esperanto. It bids farewell to the "radical" goal of gaining acceptance for Esperanto as a universal second language, regarding it instead as one language among others, a language that people may use as they see fit and without ambitions of an ideological nature.

Esperanto's development is scrutinised by a body called the Academy of Esperanto. The Academy's task is to develop the language within the framework of the Fundamento, the basis established by Zamenhof. Decisions made by the Academy are not binding, but resemble guidelines that have the character of well-considered recommendations. Actually, the Academy often either fails to keep pace with Esperanto's development or is in some cases incapable of providing unanimous recommendations because of internal differences.

Sometimes the objection is raised that Esperanto is sexist, because — according to a superficial analysis — all feminine forms are derived from masculine ones. At first sight there appears to be some truth in this, because words denoting persons can indeed always be converted to a feminine form by adding -in- to the basic form, e.g. laborist-in-o = (female) worker. Nevertheless, what differentiates Esperanto from many European languages, for example, is that it has no grammatical gender. Words have no gender unless the object they denote has natural gender (for example: "chair" is not feminine like it is in French or masculine like in German, but "mother" and "father" are feminine and masculine respectively.) Although the basic structure of the language is non-sexist, it must be noted that actual usage in Esperanto, as it is used within a patriarchal society, does have traits of sexism. The existing possibilities for generating words denoting male persons are rarely utilised, as the basic form is usually perceived to be masculine. It is not far from here to the criticism that all feminine forms are derived from (what appear to be) masculine forms. While technically untrue, this critique is understandable. If linguistic sexism is to be reduced, Esperanto must be used in a more conscious way, and the same applies to almost every other language!

2. Esperanto and Anarchism

Anarchists were among the pioneers that propagated Esperanto. One of the first anarchist Esperanto groups was founded in Stockholm in 1905. Many others were to follow: in Bulgaria, China and other countries. Anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists were the most numerous group among proletarian Esperantists before World War I. In 1906 they established an international association, Paco-Libereco [Peace-Freedom], which published the *Internacia Socia Revuo*. Paco-Libereco joined forces with another progressive association, Esperantista Laboristaro, in 1910. The common organisation was called Liberiga Stelo [Star of Liberation]. By 1914 these organisations had published a great deal of revolutionary literature, some of it anarchist. One example of an activity that began in the years prior to World War I was the animated correspondence that took place between European and Japanese anarchists. In 1907 the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam passed a resolution on the international language issue, and similar congress resolutions were passed in the following years. The Esperantists that attended these congresses became particularly involved in anarchist international relations. In Germany Esperanto came to be widely used within the workers' movement especially between 1920 and 1933. In August 1932 the German Workers' Esperanto League had 4,000 members – and it was not without reason that Esperanto was affectionately referred to as the “Workers' Latin”. The workers' Esperanto movement developed a great variety of international exchanges: “The worker Esperantists usually belonged to the parties and the cultural and social political movements of that era. They regarded it as their task to enable the utilisation of the international language Esperanto at an international level for the purposes of the particular organisations (...). At the Workers' Olympics Esperanto had an important function as a means of communication between peoples that spoke different languages. Moreover, Esperanto was placed at the service of cultural organisations of all working-class political and trade-union tendencies, for example within the Workers' Gymnastics and Sports League, the Workers' Samaritan League (...) and many others”. *Illustrierte Geschichte der Arbeiter-Esperanto-Bewegung*, p. 66.

In August 1921 a meeting of 79 workers from 15 countries was held in Prague. They founded the previously mentioned SAT, an organisation of anti-nationalist leftists that is still active today. SAT reached its peak in 1929–1930. At that time it had 6,524 members in 42 countries. By 1997 it had fewer than 1,500 members. The foundation of SAT and its initial consistent self-isolation from the bourgeois Esperanto movement were results of general political developments at the time, which were encouraged by the doctrinaire application of the policy of political neutralism by the bourgeois Esperanto movement of the time.

In March 1925 a “Berlin Group of Anarcho-Syndicalist Esperantists” greeted the 2nd Congress of the International Workers' Association (IWA), which was then being held in Amsterdam. It stated that in the German IWA section, the FAUD, Esperanto had “taken root to such an extent that a world organisation of Esperantists on a libertarian-antiauthoritarian basis has been established”. This is probably a reference to the TLES [which translates approximately as “World League of Stateless Esperantists”], which was founded in the 1920s, as SAT was subject to strong communist influence in the beginning. TLES appears to have later been absorbed by SAT.

The workers' Esperanto movement was especially strong in Germany and the USSR, where, among other things, the “Scientific Anarchist Library of the International Language” (ISAB) was founded in 1923. It published *Ethics* by Kropotkin, *Anarchism* by Borovoi and other works for an international readership in Esperanto. One of the important centres of activity for anarchist

Esperantists during this period was the Far East, China and Japan. In these countries Esperanto quickly became a topic of popular attention thanks to anarchists. A few journals, mainly bilingual, were published. Starting in 1913, Liu Shifu (his nickname: Sifo) published the journal *La Voĉo de l'Popolo* [The Voice of the People]. It was the first anarchist periodical ever to appear in China. In the beginning, the information in its Chinese-language section stemmed mainly from the aforementioned *Internacia Socia Revuo*. Liu Shifu died in 1915 at a young age. There were many anarchists and socialists among the first Japanese Esperantists. They were repeatedly subjected to persecution. In 1931 the journal *La Anarkiisto* ceased to appear when its editors were put in prison. Anarchist Esperantists suffered a major setback when many of them were murdered or sent to labour camps during the persecution of Soviet Esperantists (see II. 3. Repression). Esperanto had a minor role in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). From 1936–39 a weekly information bulletin of the CNT/FAI was published by ILES (Iberian League of Esperantist Anarchists). The CNT/FAI radio station also had broadcasts in Esperanto.

After World War II, the Paris group was the first to engage anew in organised work. Starting in 1946, it published a periodical called *Senŝtatano*. Years later there was still an active anarchist group in Paris. In 1981 Radio Esperanto was founded at its instigation. Radio Esperanto continues to broadcast one hour weekly on the frequency of Radio Libertaire. Most libertarian and anarchist Esperantists have since been organised in SAT. Its anarchist members constitute an autonomous “faction” in SAT, which in 1969 began to publish the *Liberecana Bulteno*, which has since been renamed *Liberecana Ligilo*.

3. Repression

The history of Esperanto has included not only harassment and disparagement, but also outright bans and persecutions. Esperanto has been viewed by various regimes as a “dangerous language” (which is the title of a very commendable work noted in the Bibliography): As early as 1895 the journal *La Esperantisto* was disallowed from entering tsarist Russia; in 1922 the teaching of Esperanto was banned from French schools; in 1935 the teaching of Esperanto (which had been an optional subject at “free schools”) was prohibited in Germany; in 1936 Esperanto itself was banned in Germany and Portugal; from the mid-30s onward, publications of SAT along with anarchist publications could no longer enter the USSR. As Stalinist repression increased, the activities of the once strong Soviet Esperanto movement were subjected to ever greater limitations. In a swift move in 1937, many of the most active Esperantists were arrested and either shot or sent off to prison camps. Esperanto was from then on ostracised and strictly forbidden as a “product of bourgeois internationalism and cosmopolitanism”; starting in 1938, Esperanto was banned in all territories that had been occupied or annexed by Germany.

These prohibitions and persecutions greatly hampered and inhibited the Esperanto movement, and with it the propagation and development of the International Language.

Even after World War II there was to be no easy fresh start in 1945. Under Stalin’s influence, Esperanto groups were prohibited in East Germany in 1949, followed by a ban in Hungary in 1950 and Czechoslovakia in 1952. After Stalin’s death there was a slow revival of the Esperanto movement in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, followed in 1965 by East Germany, in which the Esperanto movement was able to organise within the Culture League.

III. Relevance of Esperanto

1. Relevance within the Libertarian Spectrum

One reason the libertarian spectrum should find Esperanto relevant is that grassroots democratic groups and social movements cannot maintain staffs of translators and interpreters — unlike governments and corporations. As a rule, they must do without language services. It is also much more sensible to spend limited funds on concrete activities. (This, in practice, often prevents any continuous international cooperation.) The power relationships within a system of quasi-communication — when the communication is through an interpreter — are also something of a problem from an anarchist perspective. Moreover, educationally disadvantaged members of grassroots groups are almost completely excluded from the work that is done on the international level, because they possess no knowledge or insufficient knowledge of foreign languages. Generally speaking, internationalists and anti-nationalists face the fundamental question of how to enable people of various languages, who are otherwise unable to communicate with each other, to enter unhindered collective activity.

Anarchists in particular should find that Esperanto has much to offer in terms of this kind of exchange. Yet it is a fact that anarchists do not make much more intensive use of Esperanto than do other movements or groups within the population. There is a libertarian faction within SAT, which publishes a quarterly bulletin, *Liberecana Ligilo* [“Libertarian Link”]. By publishing translations from various languages and different libertarian tendencies, it is able to bring the various ideas to the attention of a small, but diverse internationalist public.

An anarchist living in Germany complained with respect to the barriers to international comprehension:

“More or less in isolation from one another, (we) work and fight, without engaging in an exchange about our victories and defeats, and without supporting and encouraging one another. Intensifying contact above the regional level with people having similar ideas and aims should be an important component of our work, in order to make effective active solidarity possible.” (*Graswurzelrevolution* 183, p. 13).

This observation hits the nail on the head: our attempts to practice solidarity on an international scale and to get ourselves networked usually stay within very modest dimensions. One of the chief causes of this is the problem of linguistic comprehension.

Whoever reads the libertarian press, encounters fairly frequent complaints on the part of groups that are unable to manage their foreign-language correspondence, organise international meetings with interpreters, etc. At present, the international cooperation of anarchist, autonomous and grassroots trade union forces depend for the most part on the use of whatever language knowledge happens to be available. Here is how that works: somebody in the group knows language X and therefore it is possible to establish contact with people in or from region X. This way of establishing contacts is spontaneous and organic. Yet the superficial “pragmatism” of this principle of haphazardness has the great weakness that contacts are quickly interrupted if the “key persons” with the language skills cease to be available for whatever reason. Even in a country like Germany, where many people have some English skills, people’s proficiency in the language is seldom up to the task. The ability to speak English as a second language is usually based on long years of compulsory instruction at school, a system rooted in the economic and

ideological bond that Germany has with the US. This is not the case all over the world. In the ultimate analysis, English is not “the” international language, but only the most widespread colonial or hegemonic language.

The proportion of anarchists in the Esperanto movement is no greater than in the population at large, at least in Germany. Anarchists’ position in the Esperanto movement on the whole is marginal. Mutual misgivings between Esperanto-speaking anarchists on the one hand, and apolitical/“bourgeois” Esperanto-speakers on the other hand complicate relations. Few, if any, libertarian and anarchist Esperantists are interested in an exclusive or very extensive use of the language within the movement while it is still not widespread beyond. Esperanto could, however, gain true acceptance as an additional means of communication within the movement if there were a greater understanding of the way languages and language choice are used as tools by states and economic interests, and also as criteria of social selection and exclusion.

2. Relevance of Esperanto for Society in General

All kinds of interest groups that are making an effort to collaborate and network above and beyond language barriers would benefit greatly from having an easy-to-learn and politically neutral language for general communication. For this purpose, “major” languages like Spanish, French, English, Russian and Chinese are inadequate. With Esperanto, direct contacts can be made in many directions, without any particular national language being made the standard.

It is worth emphasising that Esperanto is more than just a relatively simple means of communication. Since it “belongs” neither to any “people” nor to any state, and as there are but a scant number of native speakers of Esperanto, nobody can claim ownership of it. In practice this means a high degree of communicative equity, which overcomes the troublesome dynamics of the relation between “omniscient” native speakers and bedevilled “foreigners”. Esperanto thus opens the way to a high level of communicative equality, something that enthralled many Esperanto-speakers. If that seems difficult to comprehend, a comparison may help: this feeling of equality is not dissimilar to the euphoria of those (usually highly educated) Germans who finally manage to assert themselves with enough self-confidence in English. In doing so, they get the impression that they can “talk to the whole world”. Esperanto takes this feeling and the opportunities associated with it a step further — it can open as many different doors as if one had learned, along with English, Spanish, Russian, Japanese and a few other languages.

IV. Summary and Critique

As previously mentioned, Esperanto is often characterised as an “artificial language”, as opposed to other languages, which are perceived to be “natural”. But since the victory of the nation-state principle, at the very latest, a differentiation between “artificial” and “natural” languages is hardly tenable. The reason is that forces of standardisation exert great pressure on the language of any national state. Languages like standard German or French have for centuries been standardised and regulated through law and by decree as well as by the mass media. Authors, story-tellers and inventive individuals from all social strata exert a direct and conscious influence on language. Criteria for what is “natural” and “artificial” become blurred. Nevertheless, many people harbour thoroughly ethnicist prejudices about the pristine character of their own language and its superiority (or that of other national languages) over one that is felt to be “artificial” and therefore

automatically inferior. So it is no mere happenstance that “Esperanto” is deprecated as a bastardised linguistic mishmash or abused as a metaphor denoting an activity that levels something to a low standard (e.g. “Esperanto Europe” [Helmut Kohl]). It must be emphasised that Esperanto has developed to a large extent spontaneously since 1887.

An interesting analysis of subliminal fear of Esperanto has been provided by Claude Piron in his study *Psychological Reactions to Esperanto*: “Esperanto is seen as troublesome in a world where every people has its own language, and where this tool is passed on en masse from one’s ancestors and no individual is entitled to violate it. It demonstrates that a language is not necessarily the gift of past centuries, but may result from simple convention. Taking as its criterion of correctness not conformity with authority, but effectiveness of communication, it changes the way of interrelating: where previously there was a vertical axis, it replaces it with a horizontal axis. Thus it attacks many profound matters on which light is not accustomed to be thrown. For example, what happens to the language hierarchy because of it? Irish Gaelic, Dutch, French and English are not seen as equal in people’s minds or in many official texts. If people of different languages used Esperanto to communicate with one another, this hierarchy would lose its basis.” [translation by William Auld]

Esperanto is also accused of being eurocentric. (It is curious that such critics often compromise their argument by throwing their support to English or Spanish as languages for international communication.) This critique contains a kernel of truth: Esperanto, linguistically speaking, bears in many respects the stamp of Indo-European languages. Esperanto also originated in eastern Europe and maintains to this day a certain European flavour by virtue of the fact that most Esperanto-speakers still live in Europe. Yet Esperanto has reacted to a number of non-Indo-European stimuli in the course of its development, as is corroborated by some of the information in this article: the well-established activity in Japan and China, the “Hungarian period”² of its development, or the formation of words in Esperanto through agglutination, something that is atypical in Indo-European languages.

Many feel that Esperanto is worthy of support, yet refrain from learning it out of pragmatic considerations. They prefer to utilise their valuable free time learning a “major” language, which they regard as more practical. Other Esperanto sympathisers, in the face of the dominance of English in today’s world, are reticent to get involved in learning and actively using the language. It has always taken a good bit of idealism to learn and practice Esperanto.

Fallacious beliefs about the users of Esperanto also abound. They are believed to promote Esperanto as a panacea for conflicts and wars. And journalists occasionally circulate the rumour that Esperanto is dead. Speculation as to the future of Esperanto is pointless. It should be stressed that Esperanto exists, that the Esperanto movement is stable, and that Esperanto is used intensively, however limited its total share of international communication may be. And anarchists use it too.

² It is to be noted that Hungarian is not an Indo-European language. It belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages. These languages are structurally very different from Indo-European languages.

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