

ESPERANTO: COMMUNICATING AN ALTERNATIVE

Mina Dan

Professor

Department of Linguistics
University of Calcutta
Kolkata, West Bengal, India
Website: www.caluniv.ac.in
Email: mina.dan@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Esperanto, unlike our known mother tongues, is a constructed language with an extremely regular structure, hence offering a high degree of learnability. L.L. Zamenhof constructed the language and wished it to function as an auxiliary language for international communication and thus to break language barriers and bring people together across cultures and ethnicities. For the last 125 years Esperanto has been evolving like any other ethnic tongue through its usage by a worldwide ever growing speech community and its literature that includes more than 40,000 publications currently. To the Esperanto community Esperanto is a movement that aims at, to mention a few, democracy, global education, multilingualism, language rights, language diversity and human emancipation. To those who claim that the original purpose of Esperanto has already been attained through the globalization of English, Esperantists point out that the political and economic asymmetry that disenfranchises those less proficient in English is a hegemonic design feature associated with the way English is disseminated, whereas the users of Esperanto not only stand for the linguistic dignity of all communities but successfully resist hegemonic distortions of communicative symmetry in their own practices. This paper provides a brief history, structure and goals of Esperanto.*

Keywords: artificial language, international auxiliary language, bridge language, Zamenhof, grammar, learnability, Esperanto movement, democracy, global education, linguistic rights.

Introduction

Esperanto, as an entity well known to the linguists and language lovers, is the name of a language which, unlike any of the known mother tongues, was deliberately designed by a human architect, an ophthalmologist, named Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof at the end of the 19th century in order to address certain communication crisis of mankind. The intension behind the construction of this language, the very structure of it and the purposes it has been serving for the last 125 years are not only very unique but also extremely relevant even for the present and also for the future time, which is why Esperanto is considered the most successful artificial language in the world.

Mandarin, Spanish, English and Hindi, in this order, top the list of world languages with maximum number of native speakers and are spoken by 14%, 5.85%, 5.52%, and 4.46% of the world population respectively (Ethnologue, 2011). While Esperanto has a fuzzy range of 200-2,000 mother tongue speakers, Esperanto, in reality, sustains through its speakers who chose the language voluntarily as their other tongue for communicating an alternative. The number of such speakers, as stated in the Ethnologue data, is around 2,000,000, which too is an approximate as well as a meager figure. The Wikipedia page on Esperanto submits a different set of information while reporting on this language. Unlike other language information that include items like region, ethnicity, native speakers, language family, writing system and so on, in a gist boxed on the right side of the page, the box on the Esperanto page contains a green and white flag with a green star on the corner, and information on the name of the creator, date, number of L1 and L2 users, purpose, sources etc. Another Wikipedia page on Native Esperanto Speakers in a similar box provides hyperlinks on Esperanto clubs, films, libraries, literature, music, publications, symbols, Zamenhof Day and so on. Besides, esperanta Vikipedio, the Esperanto edition of Wikipedia, having about 170,000 articles is also available on the internet, which is currently the 27th largest Wikipedia as measured by the number of articles.

With these global level information in hand in this paper we shall offer a brief history of the language in section 1, a sketch of the language structure in section 2, and focus on its achievements and objectives in section 3, which will be followed by a conclusion.

1. About Esperanto

Though unlike any of the ethnic languages that we speak or learn Esperanto is a test-tube language (Dan, 2011), the Esperanto speech community has been using it like any other ethnic languages for the last 125 years. As a result, Esperanto has evolved naturally just like any test-tube baby starts growing naturally the moment it is out of the controlled environment of its mother's womb. A Polish doctor, Dr. Zamenhof, designed the various components of the grammar and constructed a prototype of the language and published that on the 26th July, 1887. In his booklet of 40 pages, called *unua libro* 'first book', he requested the readers to check if the grammatical tools he designed worked properly, i.e. the rules generated language sufficiently and accurately. He also requested his readers to look for loopholes, to identify the points of failure in the system and to report. In this process only one mistake was detected, in the temporal expression suffix. He corrected that, changed that suffix from /n/ to /m/, and published the second booklet in 1888, with a declaration that with this very publication his responsibility is over, henceforth the language should be treated as a public/users' property and be controlled by its users. The word Esperanto signifies 'the one who hopes' in English. In the first booklet Zamenhof named the language *la internacia lingvo* 'the international language' and he himself used a pseudo name *Doktoro Esperanto*. Afterwards the users named the language Esperanto.

Zamenhof was born on 15th December, 1859, in a place called Byalistok, in Russia, but now in Poland, in a Jew family. In his locality lived four distinct groups of people, the Russian, the German, the Polish and the Jew. They spoke only their respective mother tongues, they used to move in their own groups and never used to try to understand other's languages. As a result there always used to be communication gap, misunderstanding, mistrust and communal fights between groups. Zamenhof stated that in his childhood he always saw either the Poles, or the Russians, or the Germans or the Jews around him, rather than any complete human being. He felt that the chief responsible factor behind all unrest was language, more specifically the language barrier. Because these groups never understood each other's language each group considered the others enemies. He earnestly worked for a linguistic solution to this communication crisis. His sincere wish took the shape of Esperanto, a language with a simplified grammar, so that people can learn it easily; a language with ideological values, a language people would learn out of love in order to understand each other and attain peace. The objective behind the creation of Esperanto was to attain world peace.

Since childhood Zamenhof was a polyglot, he knew Russian, Hebrew, German, French, Polish, Yiddish and afterwards learnt English. Thus the methodology of creating Esperanto involved, on the one hand, Zamenhof's profound knowledge of various languages and, on the other hand, democracy. After its creation the language was very democratically passed on to the users for its natural growth, unlike what had happened in case of other artificial languages. For example, another language Volapuk, designed by Schleyer, was already there at the time when Esperanto was created. But since Schleyer himself used to control the language by incorporating necessary changes Volapuk lacked natural growth and failed to sustain.

The 1st world congress of Esperanto was held in August 1905, in Boulogne-sur-Mer, in France. 688 Esperanto speakers from 20 nationalities were present there. It was evident that people learnt the language out of ideology, out of love and respect for the mankind. Zamenhof was overwhelmed with this wide scale of response. At this congress he proposed a declaration on founding Esperanto movements which the attendees endorsed and he himself resigned from the leadership of the movement. Since 1905 except during the two World Wars the world congress of Esperanto has been held every year.

After the 1st congress Esperanto federations were established in several countries and a number of journals started to come out. The Esperanto community as well as the movement became ever growing. Currently the central organization of Esperanto UEA (Universala Esperanto Asocio 'Universal Esperanto Association') has members in 120 countries all over the globe and there were more than 1,000 attendees in the 97th world congress of Esperanto held in Hanoi, Vietnam, in July, 2012.

As regards the evolution of Esperanto, to mention a few traits, the number of official roots used in the language in 1887 has increased from 800 to 9,000, plus at least another 9,000 unofficial ones; similarly the number of official affixes has increased by eight percent (esperanto.org); the old suffix /-emeco/ indicating a tendency has reduced to /-emo/ (e.g. hezitemeco > hezitemo 'hesitancy', parolemeco>parolemo 'talkativeness'), signifying morphological simplification; various writing styles have developed; and the Esperanto

library currently possesses more than 40,000 publications, including both translated and original works.

With the continuous expansion of the Esperanto community Esperanto attained a robust international profile. The expansion was evident in the 1st world congress itself. After the 1st World War seven countries, including India, who were the members of the then League of Nations, jointly put up a proposal to the League of Nations to consider introducing Esperanto at school level across the world. As regards the efficiency of Esperanto as a tool for peacemaking a very positive report was also submitted. But the decision was blocked by the veto from the representative of France, who apprehended Esperanto as a threat for the French language.

Esperanto has been well recognized by UNESCO in 1954. Esperanto is also very intimately associated with the concepts and activities of human rights. In fact, the chief document of human rights was first drafted by an Esperantist named Ralph Harry, an Australian diplomat. He was given this assignment when he was quite young. He succeeded to convince Ivo Lapenna, the then important leader of the Esperanto movement who was quite well versed in International Law, and as a result, Lapenna included the point of practicing human rights in the constitution of UEA. Esperantists work for linguistic rights too. Presently Esperanto is taught as a part of the school curriculum in many countries.

The names of many eminent figures are linked with Esperanto in some way or the other. To name a few, personalities like Paul Neergaard and John Wells actively boosted the Esperanto movement. Joseph Tito of Yugoslavia and Ho Chi Minh of China knew Esperanto. Mao Ze Dong and Bernard Shaw were in support of the language. At least six scholars on the Nobel Prize winners list were Esperantists. The Indian chapter of the Esperanto movement presents the name of Lakshmiswar Sinha, a worker at Rabindranath Tagore's experimental academic institution at Santiniketan, currently known as Visva-Bharati. Tagore sent Sinha to Sweden in 1928 to learn sloyd, a handicraft based education system. There Sinha learnt not only sloyd but also Esperanto very well and became an important figure in the Esperanto movement when he was only twenty three. European people loved him and wanted to work with him. He stayed in Europe for three to four years at a stretch roaming from one city to another and

strengthening the movement. At present, for the last six years UEA has an Indian president, Probal Dasgupta, another important figure in the Esperanto movement.

Zamenhof died a natural death on the 14th April, 1917. However, his children, being Esperantists as well as Jews, could not survive the 2nd World War and the Holocaust. His only son Adam, a surgeon, was executed; both his daughters Sofia, a pediatrician, and Lidia, a linguist, were victims of the concentration camp of Treblinka. His daughter-in-law, Wanda, an ophthalmologist, along with her son Ludwik survived somehow.

Two very powerful figures in the history, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, punished many Esperantists to death because of their anti-nationalistic activities. In the opinion of Hitler Esperanto was designed as a universal language in order to unite the Jewish diaspora, while Stalin considered Esperanto as “the language of the spies”.

2. Structure of Esperanto

Esperanto not only shows a very regular structure but also displays a straightforward correspondence between the written and spoken modes of the language, especially in respect of pronunciation and spelling, which is why the language in effect is highly learner-friendly. What is more, the grammar of the language consists of only sixteen rules which have no exception.

The phonology or sound system of Esperanto consists of 28 speech sounds and the language employs 28 letter symbols, of which six symbols are modified, from the Roman script for writing. It has 5 vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and 23 consonants (b, c, ĉ, d, f, g, ĝ, h, ĥ, j, ĵ, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, ŝ, t, v, z, ŭ). Since there is one-to-one relationship between the sounds and the letters, the language in effect presents spelling pronunciation, also called phonetic spelling, system which is more like Spanish, and unlike English. For example, let us consider the following English words. /ɑ:l/ ‘all’, /fækt/ ‘fact’, /pɑ:t/ ‘part’, /meɪk/ ‘make’, /bred/ ‘bread’, /brɔ:d/ ‘broad’, /hi:p/ ‘heap’, /heə/ ‘hair’, /θrəʊt/ ‘throat’, /wɒt/ ‘what’, /ti:/ ‘tea’, /ɪnɪəl/ ‘initial’. Though all these twelve words spell with <a>, <a> is pronounced in twelve different ways in them. Hence <a> lacks a consistent sound value in English. However, in Esperanto each letter symbol has a fixed as well as consistent sound value. The Esperanto words <rolo, formo, konfidi, mono, roko, honoro, metodo> ‘role, form, trust, money, rock, honour, method’ spell

with <o> which is pronounced as /o/ everywhere. Every letter symbol in Esperanto displays similar consistency. In addition, every word with more than one syllable is stressed on the penultimate syllable without exception. A consistent sound value of letters in combination with the penultimate word stress enables not only a simple orthography but also straightforward text-to-speech and speech-to-text conversion processes.

The morphology or the word formation process too is extremely regular. Words are formed by adding suffixes and prefixes to roots and also to words already known. For example, suffixes /-o, -i, -a, -e/ when added to a root indicate noun, verb, adjective and adverb respectively. Words formed with the root /kuraĝ-/ are noun /kuraĝo/ ‘courage’, verb /kuraĝi/ ‘dare’, adjective /kuraĝa/ ‘courageous’ and adverb /kuraĝe/ ‘courageously’. The suffix /-igi/ indicates causative, thus we get /kuraĝigi/ ‘encourage’.

The morphological regularity enables the grammar to function with a limited number of roots which indicate economy. For example, /-ino/ is the suffix for feminine. Thus we get /patro/ & /patrino/ ‘father’ & ‘mother’, /avo/ & /avino/ ‘grandfather’ & ‘grandmother’, /kuzo/ & /kuzino/ ‘cousin brother’ & ‘cousin sister’, /bovo/ & /bovino/ ‘bull’ & ‘cow’, /hundo/ & /hundino/ ‘dog’ & ‘bitch’ and so on. Moreover, one can rightly guess if /kato, ĉevalo, azeno/ are ‘cat’, ‘horse’ and ‘ass’ respectively what would their feminine forms be in Esperanto. Similarly, /mal-/ is a negative prefix. Thus we get pairs like /fermi – malfermi/ ‘close – open’, /alta – malalta/ ‘tall – short’, /antaŭ – malantaŭ/ ‘in front – behind’, /sano – malsano/ ‘health – ill-health’ and so on. Thus, the meaning of /malaperi/ is understood unmistakably if one knows /aperi/ means ‘appear’ and vice versa.

Esperanto morphology is efficient in building up more complex words with equal transparency. The suffixes /-ilo, -aro, -ejo/, with the sense of ‘tool’, ‘collective’ and ‘place’ respectively, when added to various roots form words like /haki – hakilo/ ‘chop – axe/ chop-tool’, /arbo – arbaro/ ‘tree – forest/ tree-cluster’, /kuiro – kuirejo/ ‘cook – kitchen/ cook-place’. With the root /skrib-/ one can form complex words like /skribi/ ‘write’, /skribilo/ ‘writing implement’, /skribilaro/ ‘writing implement set/ stationery’, /skribilarejo/ ‘writing implement set place/ stationery shop’.

Esperanto morphology is competent enough to lexicalize various types of concept and express nuances. For example, the suffixes /-ero, -aĵo/ having the sense of ‘small particle of a whole’ and ‘thing’ form words like /pluvo – pluvero/ ‘rain – raindrop’ and /manĝi – manĝaĵo/ ‘eat – food’. With the root /sabl-/ one can form /sablo/ ‘sand’, /sablero/ ‘a grain of sand’, /sablaro/ ‘a set of grains of sand’, /sablajo/ ‘a sand-mass’, /sableraĵo/ ‘a sand-grain mass’.

Because of its inherent consistency, regularity and enormous potentiality of lexicalization Esperanto morphology has been employed for creating a standard notational device for lexical representation in the domains of lexical archiving, especially in conceptually oriented cross-linguistic investigation of words, by Dasgupta (2006, 2008,).

In Esperanto the sentential word order is very flexible. In short, every module of the grammar is simple, consistent and exceptionless, hence ensures a high learnability. That is why even the self-taught mode of learning results in great success in learning Esperanto. Ample amount of self-taught materials are available at websites, e.g. lernu.net, and in printed forms in various languages, e.g. in Bengali (Sircar, 2012).

3. Achievements and objectives

Esperanto was launched in 1887 as a project for an auxiliary language for international communication. Immediately it received positive response. As a result quite quickly it developed into a rich living language in its own right and also a passionate Esperanto community, spread all over the globe, came into being. Through its journey of 125 years Esperanto has become the tongue of not any country or ethnic group but a neutral international language. Since the beginning the members of the Esperanto community interacted through letters and the community grew through the network of pen friendship, which may rightly be termed the first internet system of the planet. Now the present internet technology and e-mail facilities have replaced the earlier mode.

Esperanto speakers are by default multilingual, which is why the literary treasures of a range of minor and major languages of the world have been translated either into Esperanto or into some other language via Esperanto. Hence Esperanto functions as a bridge language.

Besides, Esperanto functions well in every aspect of life. It is sufficiently developed and is used for diverse purposes like international communication, intercultural learning,

international relations, internet, e-mail, new friendship, international congress, seminars, meetings, science, books, magazines, lectures, radio transmission, concerts, songs, theaters, language festivals, festivals, travel, tourism, games, jokes, even for quarrelling and last but not the least for being hosted free of charge in the homes of Esperantists in other countries.

Esperanto is considered the most useful tongue for neutral communication. It signifies that the communication through Esperanto does not give advantages to members of any particular country or culture or ethnicity. Rather it is marked for providing an ethos of equality of rights, tolerance and true internationalism. With this inherent feature Esperanto is not only a name of a language but also a movement in itself.

The objectives of the Esperanto movement are, in brief, stated below.

- i) To attain democratic communication in the face of communicative inequality resulting from language inequality.
- ii) To introduce global education that enables a child to look at the world without borders what so ever.
- iii) To ensure effective language learning through the regular structure of Esperanto that offers a high degree of learnability compared to other ethnic languages. Studies have shown that learning Esperanto enhances one's language learning capacity.
- iv) To nurture multilingualism by providing everyone an opportunity of learning a second language to a high communicative level. In fact, every member of the Esperanto community is at least bilingual and many are multilingual.
- v) To respect linguistic rights of all communities by creating an ever spreading Esperanto platform where the speakers of languages, large and small, official and unofficial, meet on equal terms through a mutual willingness to compromise.
- vi) To safeguard language diversity by appraising language diversity as a constant and indispensable source of enrichment of civilization, rather than barrier to communication and development.
- vii) To attain emancipation of humankind through freedoms of expression, communication and association across the barriers of culture, ethnicity and the like.

Conclusion

To those who claim that the original purpose of Esperanto has already been attained through the globalization of English, Esperantists point out that the political and economic asymmetry

that disenfranchises those less proficient in English is a hegemonic design feature associated with the way English is disseminated, whereas the users of Esperanto not only stand for the linguistic dignity of all communities but successfully resist hegemonic distortions of communicative symmetry in their own practices and thus communicate an alternative.

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