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Esperanto as a Family Language

Abstract. Esperanto was created to serve as a common second language in the world, but its present role as a vehicular language is confined to a rather small number of speakers who use it in their personal contacts and cultural activities, but seldom in their trades and professions. They form a kind of diasporic speech community with certain shared cultural values and symbols, original literature unknown outside the community, and frequent personal contacts at various meetings and on the Internet. Esperanto has also been used as a family language for about one hundred years, and there are perhaps one thousand first-language speakers. The paper presents an overview of the little-studied field of Esperanto as a native and family language and points out some methodological and factual problems in the few published studies. The major pitfalls of the study of native Esperanto are identified as follows: (i) concentrating on mixed marriages only; (ii) confusing the Esperanto speech community with the Esperanto movement; (iii) not knowing the language sufficiently; (iv) ignoring the subjects' linguistic background, and (v) expecting *a priori* nativisation to bring about changes in the language.

1. Introduction

It is not uncommon that a vehicular language comes to be used as an everyday language in some families, even though it is native to neither parent. Besides such better-known examples as English, French or Russian, Esperanto presents a linguistically interesting case of such a language. Though its role in interethnic communication has remained limited, Esperanto was certainly a language created first and foremost to serve as a common second language in the world, and therefore its use in families and its nativisation may seem to be a surprising development. This paper aims to present an overview of the phenomenon and to point out some methodological and factual problems in some of the published studies.

The basic grammar and vocabulary of Esperanto were designed by the Polish Jew Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1856–1917), who was born in Białystok in what was at that time the western part of the Russian Empire. His booklet *Международный языкъ* 'An International Language' appeared in Warsaw in 1887 (Zamenhof, 1887). The new language, which soon became known as Esperanto after the pseudonym Zamenhof had used, became by far the most successful among constructed international languages.

Though originally an artificial language, Esperanto has acquired several features of a natural language. Its norm has always been partly non-codified, i.e., Esperanto cannot be learnt from textbooks, grammars, and dictionaries alone, but only by participating in the speech community. The concept of speech community as applied to Esperanto is discussed by Wood (1979) and Fettes (1996). Several grammatical and lexical changes during the history of Esperanto have not been due to official or unofficial language planning and codification, but have been initiated and spread by anonymous speakers, being codified only afterwards (or not at all). This spontaneous change of Esperanto has been studied by Schubert (1989), Piron (1989), Philippe (1991), and Gledhill (2000), among others. I have argued that Esperanto can be viewed as a contact language that has from its very beginning incorporated spontaneous unconscious influences from other languages and from the human language faculty (Lindstedt, 2006 ; Lindstedt, forthcoming). The most complete modern grammar of Esperanto (Wennergren, 2005) is mainly descriptive in its approach, and its prescriptive passages are not based so much on earlier grammars as on the actual usage of accomplished authors.

The use of Esperanto as a vehicular language is confined to a rather small number of speakers who use it in their personal contacts and cultural activities, but seldom in their trades and professions. Their diasporic speech community is held together by several factors: (i) literature (including both original and translated fiction), periodicals, and radio broadcasts; (ii) different kinds of meetings, ranging from official congresses and cultural festivals to smaller reunions and family camps, and (iii) the Internet, which at least for the middle-aged and young generation is increasingly becoming the centre of Esperanto activities, partly at the cost of traditional clubs and associations. The Esperanto Wikipedia, for instance, has over 100,000 articles and has thus reached the same class by size as the Czech, Danish, and Hungarian editions.

There are no reliable statistics on the speakers of Esperanto. Nuessel (2000 : 82–83) notes that the estimates given in different sources range between 120,000 and 15 million (!). The historian Sikosek (2003 : 60) says that even 40,000 is an “optimistic estimate” and that he would not be surprised if it turned out that fewer than 10,000 people speak Esperanto fluently.¹ The numbers can of course be very different depending on what level of language proficiency is chosen as the criterion. My rough estimate is that there are about 100,000 people who can actively use the language, and about 10,000 who can be classified as fluent speakers, with an error margin of perhaps half an order of magnitude in both figures (i.e., there may be between 30,000 and 300,000 who can actively use the language, and between 3,000 and 30,000 fluent speakers).

2. Esperanto as a family language and a native language

Frequently, Esperanto speakers with different native languages marry and Esperanto remains the common language in their marriage. Such marriages have been recorded from the beginning of the 20th century (Kökény & al., 1933–35 : 184). Esperanto has also had native or first language speakers from about the same time (Butler, 1921). My own estimate of their number, based on my personal participation in different meetings and networks of Esperanto-speaking families, is about one thousand, which would mean perhaps one per cent of all the speakers of Esperanto. The phenomenon of Esperanto as a first language has been described by Versteegh (1993), Corsetti (1994 ; 1996a ; 1996b ; 2004) and Lindstedt (2006). The fact that Esperanto can be acquired as a first language can be regarded as a further proof that it has all the basic properties of a natural language.

The use of Esperanto as a family language may thus mean it is used between the spouses, or between the parents (or one of the parents) and the children, who thus become native speakers. There exist even second-generation and third-generation native speakers, though other languages are handed down in such families in parallel with Esperanto, and there are no compact native speech communities. All first-language speakers of Esperanto are at least bilingual, many of them even trilingual, and practically all of them use another language more often than Esperanto in their adult lives. Esperanto may mean either active or passive bilinguality for them – it remains passive if they were accustomed to answer the parent who spoke Esperanto to them in their other native language.

The children’s Esperanto becomes more fluent if the family has close contacts with other Esperanto-speaking families from other language communities, especially if the family participates in the camps and meetings where dozens of such families may be present. International summer camps in which Esperanto-speaking children can participate without

¹ “Do tre, tre optimisme oni povus taksi la esperantlingvanaron je maksimume 40.000 aŭ 50.000 tutmonde. Sed se post altnivela internacia enketo montriĝus ke tutmonde malpli ol dek mil homoj flue parolas esperanton, mi ne surpriziĝus” (Sikosek 2003, 60).

their parents are also organised. Code-switching or code-mixing, which may be normal inside each Esperanto-speaking family, carries a stigma at such meetings. There even exists a common Esperanto verb *krokodili* meaning ‘to speak another language when Esperanto should be spoken’, and children learn this verb early.² The social rationale of this stigma is that as there are only a limited number of occasions for practising one’s Esperanto, speaking in another language, though it would be comprehensible to the listeners, deprives them of this opportunity.

Children who become fluent speakers of Esperanto always exhibit some transfers from their other native languages. But the children also influence each other’s language use at family meetings, including the pronunciation. Thus, I have observed how the Esperanto pronunciation of one of my daughters, normally influenced by Finnish, quickly acquired traits typical of German Esperantists, when we were at a meeting in Germany – and later Italian traits under the influence of her Italian Esperanto friend. It is easy to see how a longer contact between children would sooner or later lead to a more unified pronunciation, but camps and meetings are usually too short for this to actually take place. On the other hand, the national peculiarities of pronunciation usually do not hamper mutual comprehension.

For most speakers of Esperanto it is mainly a written language because they have no opportunities to use it everyday. The native speakers of Esperanto are an exception: for them, Esperanto is primarily a spoken language. In fact, not all of them acquire good literacy in it. A fairly good selection of books exists for small children, and even more for adults, but the shortage of reading material interesting for teenagers and the impossibility of using Esperanto at school may alienate young speakers from written Esperanto. The Internet is, however, partly changing this, because it encourages written communication between friends and acquaintances from different countries.

Many – or perhaps even most – native speakers do not retain close contacts with the diasporic Esperanto community as adults, and many of them do not like to be called “Esperantists” because the word is associated with a social movement and ideology (cf. Forster, 1982). They have never personally chosen to participate in such a movement – they are just speakers of the language. On the other hand, the native speakers do not have such prestige status in the Esperanto speech community as they do in many other speech communities. Because one of the main arguments of Esperantists for proposing Esperanto as a global lingua franca is that it would not give advantage to the native speakers as the national languages do, any attempts to attach a special status to “native Esperanto” would be rejected. But it is also practically impossible to tell a native speaker of Esperanto apart from any other fluent speaker of the language (excluding the possible differences in the brain representation of the language). Esperanto has been nativised in the sense that it has acquired native speakers, but it has not been creolised in the sense of acquiring a native speech community (a distinction already pointed out by Anttila, 1972 : 176).

Most general histories of Esperanto mention the family use of Esperanto and its native speakers only briefly; thus, the more than 800-page general work edited by Lapenna & al. (1974 : 59) devotes a mere 15 lines of text to the phenomenon. But it seems that Zamenhof did envisage the family use in some fashion, although not publicly. In a private letter he

² The verb derives from the noun *krokodilo* ‘crocodile’, but its semantic motivation is not at all obvious – which again shows that changes in Esperanto often take place spontaneously. It seems that in the 1930s *krokodilo* acquired the pejorative meaning ‘an Esperanto propagandist who does not speak the language himself’, and the verb was later derived from this (Vilborg, 1989–2001, s.v. *krokodilo*). The semantic motivation may be connected to the green colour of crocodiles, since green is the colour of the Esperanto flag and other symbols, or to crocodiles’ large mouths. Other explanations given refer to the expression *krokodilaj larmoj* ‘crocodile tears’, or to the use of a crocodile toy on the nature-method lessons of the famous Esperanto teacher Andreo (András) Cseh (1895–1979).

wrote: “*An international language will be consolidated for ever only in case there will be some group of people who accept it as their familial and **inherited** language. A hundred of **such** people are enormously more important for the idea of a neutral language than millions of other people*”³ (Zamenhof, 2006 [1901] : 97; my trans. with original emphasis). But the official goal of the Esperanto movement has always been to propose the language as “everyone’s *second* language”, and there would indeed seem to be an inherent contradiction in Zamenhof’s speculation about a “neutral” language becoming *inherited* (native) for a certain group of people: what would happen to the neutrality? Zamenhof’s private remark must be understood in its context: he was dreaming of a group of people electing not only a neutral language, but also a neutral syncretic religion, and declaring themselves ethnically neutral. After the centre of the international Esperanto movement shifted from the Russian empire to France at the beginning of the 20th century, its leaders distanced themselves from Zamenhof’s social utopianism.

Zamenhof was a native of the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which, incorporated into the Russian Empire, formed a multinational and multilingual cultural area in which Polish, Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Yiddish, German, Romani, and Karaim were spoken. He was not the sole Jewish language reformer from this region: his contemporary Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), born in the town of Lužki, in present-day Belarus, succeeded in reviving and nativising the Hebrew language that had not been anyone’s mother tongue for some 1700 years (Fellman, 1973). Versteegh (1993) points out the linguistic parallels between the nativisation of Hebrew and Esperanto, though the sociolinguistic contexts are of course very different. Both Zamenhof and Ben-Yehuda were thoroughly influenced by their experience as Eastern European Jews. (Yiddish even influenced Esperanto’s structure, see Piron, 1984 ; Kiselman, 1992 ; Lindstedt, forthcoming ; cf. also Maimon, 1978.) Ben-Yehuda’s goal was to reverse the diaspora and create a nation state for the Jews; Zamenhof’s goal was to make all ethnic distinctions fade, but the official Esperanto movement never endorsed this part of his programme.

3. Pitfalls of the study

The use of Esperanto as a family language and its nativisation has not attracted much attention in linguistics. There are at least five pitfalls that may lead the study of the phenomenon astray:

i. Concentrating on mixed marriages. The existence of children with Esperanto as a native language is often explained by referring to marriages between people of different nationalities that have Esperanto as their common language. But a language used only between the parents does not usually become an active language for the children; they primarily acquire the language(s) the parents (and other caretakers) speak to them and use with them. Because speakers of Esperanto usually emphasise the equal value of all languages – this may have been the main reason for them to learn Esperanto in the first place – both parents in mixed marriages usually transfer their native language to the children. Esperanto has a chance in this scheme only if the parent whose native language is also the local language of the place where the family is living decides to speak Esperanto to the children, relying on the fact that the local language will at any rate be acquired by the children sooner or later. It is much easier for a couple with the *same* native language to decide that one of

³ “Lingvo internacia fortiĝos por ĉiam nur en tia okazo, se ekzistos ia grupo da homoj, kiuj akceptus ĝin kiel sian lingvon familian, *heredan*. Cento da *tiaj* homoj estas por la ideo de lingvo neŭtrala multege pli grava ol milionoj da aliaj homoj.”

them will speak Esperanto to the children; as pointed out by Corsetti (1996a), this parent is usually (though not always) the father.

ii. *Confusing the Esperanto speech community with the Esperanto movement.* Esperanto would probably no longer exist as a spoken language if it did not have a social movement to promote it (Forster, 1982). However, this does not mean that the Esperanto speech community coincides with this movement. On the one hand, there are some Esperanto activists who do not speak the language fluently at all; they are often referred to as *bonan-tagon-esperantistoj* (because they can only say *bonan tagon* ‘good morning/afternoon’) or *krokodilantoj* (those who *krokodilas*, see above). On the other hand, many parents of native speakers are not particularly active in the Esperanto movement and they often say that they are only transferring the language, not an ideology or world view.⁴ Ordinary speakers of Esperanto may refer to the native speakers as *denaskaj Esperantistoj* ‘native Esperantists’, but the native speakers themselves and their parents prefer *denaskaj Esperanto-parolantoj* or *denaskaj Esperant-lingvanoj*, both meaning ‘native speakers of Esperanto’, or the one-word derivative *denaskuloj*.⁵

iii. *Not knowing the language sufficiently.* In the case of Esperanto, there seems to be a special kind of “observer’s paradox”: you can know the language well only if you participate in its speech community, but if you do, you are deemed to be an “Esperanto activist” and as such, an unreliable source of scientific knowledge. This is partly due to the confusion, described above, between the speech community and the movement: it is erroneously thought that the only rational reason for someone to learn Esperanto would be to become its active propagator. On the other hand, since the language is classified as “artificial”, many linguists do not understand that there might be a difference between the codification and actual use, or that the first old textbook they happen to find might not be an adequate representation of present-day Esperanto. Bergen (2001), the first linguist to write about the phenomenon of native Esperanto-speakers in the prestigious *Journal of Child Language*, does not know the meaning of all Esperanto affixes and thinks that the anticausative suffix *-iĝ-* is an aspectual marker of inchoatives⁶; therefore, all the corresponding examples in his Table 2 are wrongly glossed.

The solution to the special “observer’s paradox” of Esperanto is to admit that a research ethic is needed both ways: if linguists (such as me) that know Esperanto describe the language, they should do it without any ideological colouring and if linguists who do not know Esperanto want to discuss it, they should take as great pains to learn it as they would do in the case of any other spoken language.

iv. *Ignoring the subjects’ linguistic background.* As far as detailed linguistic description is concerned, there is no typical native speaker of Esperanto. Every speaker has another native language, or perhaps several native languages and still another school language, and is influenced by them, each native speaker in his or her own way. In his article mentioned above, Bergen (2001) sees spontaneous nativisation changes in a group of children at an Esperanto meeting, but does not properly take account of their diverse linguistic backgrounds and the varying degrees of the regular use of Esperanto at their homes. As I have argued

⁴ It is dangerous to generalise as long as adequate studies are lacking, but it is my impression that in Europe, this is especially true of the Esperanto-speaking parents in the Western countries, whereas some parents in the former socialist countries do not always see it as a problem to think that the children will also become Esperanto activists.

⁵ Morphemes glossed: *de* ‘from’, *nask* ‘birth’, *ul* ‘person’, *o* NOUN, *j* PLURAL.

⁶ The source of this error is probably the fact that there are a small number of intransitive verbs that do use this suffix as an alternative to the inchoative prefix *ek-*, but for all transitive verbs, as well as nouns and adjectives, *ek-* and *-iĝ-* are not synonymous as Bergen seems to think (Wennergren 2005, 38.2.18). This is another example of a phenomenon which is not strictly “planned” in Esperanto.

elsewhere (Lindstedt, 2006 : 50–51), Bergen is confusing nativisation changes with interference and incomplete acquisition.

v. *Expecting a priori nativisation to bring about changes in the language.* The nativist theories of language acquisition – be they Chomskyan models or those proposed by Bickerton (1981) or Pinker (1994) – have to assume that Esperanto *must* change when it is acquired as a first language, because Zamenhof could not possibly have known all the properties of Universal Grammar and therefore could not place them in his creation. The problem is that no one has yet identified clear cases of such changes in the Esperanto of native speakers. Rather, all examples proposed seem to be due to transfers from the children’s other native languages or differences between the spoken and written register of Esperanto or, in some cases, incomplete acquisition (Lindstedt, 2006). However, this does not mean that Esperanto shows that no innate human linguistic faculty exists; it could mean that the birth process of Esperanto itself was much more spontaneous than is usually thought, and that there is much in Esperanto grammar that has never been consciously put there. If the young native speakers of Esperanto need not introduce any immediate changes to it, this may be because Esperanto has already been adjusted to the requirements of language universals or Universal Grammar in the process of being used by non-native speakers for more than 120 years.

In their oft-quoted study of the nativisation of Tok Pisin, Sankoff and Laberge (1980 : 208–209) argue that the first generation of native speakers does not create “sudden and dramatic changes in a language”, but only carries further tendencies that were already present in the speech community. Esperanto – and Tok Pisin, for that matter – show that the social dimension of nativisation processes is at least as important as the psychological dimension, and if there is some kind of innate Universal Grammar, it must be at least partly accessible to adult second-language speakers as well.

4. Final notes

The nativisation of Esperanto has no close parallels in linguistics. To some extent, it can be compared to the renativisation of Hebrew at its early stage (Versteegh, 1993 ; cf. Fellman, 1973) or to the creolisation of pidgins (Corsetti, 1994 ; 1996b ; cf. Sankoff & Laberge, 1980), but the social context of the nativisation process is different. There are no compact speech communities of native speakers of Esperanto and it is highly unlikely that such communities will arise. However, Esperanto is for its users, native and non-native alike, a symbol of group identity, though this identity is mostly secondary to their primary ethnic identities.

People using Esperanto in their families may have different opinions about the Esperanto movement as a whole, but they do share some common values which I would tentatively describe as follows: they value personal contacts with people from other countries in which the vehicular language is neutral, meaning equally foreign and familiar to everyone. The family use of Esperanto and the existence of native speakers is not considered to jeopardise this neutrality as long as no separate compact groups exist whose main language is Esperanto.

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