

Review of Koutny, Stria, Farris (eds) 2021:
The intercultural role of Esperanto / Interkultura rolo de Esperanto / Międzykulturowa rola esperanta

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Review of Ilona Koutny, Ida Stria, Michael Farris (eds) 2021: *The intercultural role of Esperanto / Interkultura rolo de Esperanto / Międzykulturowa rola esperanta*. (Cross-linguistic and Cross-cultural Studies 2.) Poznań: Rys, 254 pp. – <https://wydawnictworys.com/the-intercultural-role-of-esperanto-interkultura-rolo-de-esperanto-miedzykulturowa-rola-esperanta-red-ilona-koutny-ida-stria-michael-farris.html>

Intercultural communication is a keyword of our time. Scholars research it, companies buy expensive intercultural training courses for their staff and job applicants are assessed as to their intercultural competence. There is a language tailor-made for this purpose: Esperanto.

The book under review is one of two volumes dedicated to intercultural communication (cf. Koutny/Stria/Farris eds 2020). The present volume assembles an introduction and 16 studies approaching, from various angles, the question how Esperanto in the second century of its existence functions in exchanges between people from different countries and cultures speaking different native languages. The book is divided into three chapters, each containing five or six articles.

Chapter 1 “Esperanto: a link between cultures” is concerned with the intercultural role of literary works, with intercultural life experiences and with the intercultural, interreligious and moral purpose Zamenhof had in mind for his language Esperanto. Carlo Minnaja (Padua, Italy) investigates the role of the Esperanto literature as mediator not only between author and readers, but also among authors as a writing community. He sketches the steps and procedures that were needed for the Esperanto PEN-centre to be accepted into the international PEN organisation. Not for the first time in the history of Esperanto, its opponents were sure to know what there cannot be in Esperanto – refusing to acknowledge the observable reality. But the PEN membership was eventually accepted, paving the way for a close cooperation between the Universal Esperanto Association and UNESCO. Up to the year 2019 Minnaja shows

statistics of various branches of literature published in Esperanto, both translated and original (cf. Sutton 2008).

Lorraine Wong (Otago, New Zealand) looks into direct literary influences between authors. She shows how the Chinese poet Armand Su became inspired to write poems in Esperanto, having read a Chinese translation by Ba Jin of a story written in Esperanto by the Hungarian writer Julio Baghy. Wong sees the link between these three as evidence of the worldwide intercultural space opened up by Esperanto and the Esperanto-speaking community. Probal Dasgupta (Kolkata, India) discusses culture in a very special bridge translation setting. His object is a Croatian children's novel written with the explicit intention to let European children experience the life of indigenous peoples in other parts of the world not as exotic, but as human. The Esperanto translation of this book served as the source text for an onward translation into Bangla, an Indian language. This arrangement is part of a larger project with more novels from both sides involved. Dasgupta is particularly interested in how such a carefully designed text can be translated and transposed into another culture and thereby support a post-national pedagogical agenda that even in a literary world of imagination fosters commonness rather than emphasising differences.

Whilst most of the contributions in this volume deal with Esperanto as a neutral mediator, Christian Lavarenne (France) draws attention to the intercultural and interreligious ideas that guided L. L. Zamenhof when he created the language in the late 19th century. Lavarenne discusses Zamenhof's concept of Hillelism, a set of principles for a moral common ground across religious divisions. However, Lavarenne's analysis is primarily a learned investigation into the sources of the basic rule and of Zamenhof's wordings without much presentation of its cultural content. Lavarenne goes on to show how Zamenhof, after the first Universal Congresses of Esperanto, abandoned Hillelism and conceived of the principles of *Homaranismo* (an Esperanto word that may be glossed as 'being members of mankind'). The author thus reminds us that Zamenhof wished not only to provide the world with a language connecting people and peoples, but with a means to establish connections at the levels of culture and moral principles.

Humphrey Tonkin (Hartford, USA) analyses three outstanding personalities who, involuntarily, led a transcultural life, viz. Jerzy Kosiński, Louis Christophe Zaleski-Zamenhof and Tivadar Soros. They all were Jews from Eastern Europe, discriminated against in their home countries and persecuted by the Nazis. They had to hide and to change their names and they managed to move to the West in the 1950s. Tonkin touches upon their biographies very briefly to then look in more detail into the opportunities their life in a new culture offered them. For those who have to give up their home country and native language, being accepted and supported in the Esperanto community may help them become established in another country, language and culture and it may offer them an opportunity to sever themselves from traumatic experiences.

Chapter 2 “Esperanto: a communication tool for international language community” discusses cultural aspects of the Esperanto language

community. Identity lies at the heart of the article by Ida Stria (Warsaw, Poland), a researcher with an impressive record of skillful sociolinguistic studies. Stria investigates non-native Esperanto speakers. She compares this community to speakers of English as a *lingua franca*. In the Esperanto community, native speakers exist, but they in no way set language norms, so that a learner at a reasonable degree of proficiency will become a fully endorsed member of the language community. In English, the natives set the norm and learners virtually always fall short of it. By contrast, some researchers suggest that one should view *lingua-franca* English as a separate community decoupled from the natives' norm. It occurs to me, however, that this is an attempt to adapt reality to theory; Stria quotes scholars showing that the native norm still prevails. Stria's main focus is on legitimacy of a speaker as contributing to the language norm and on inclusion of "newcomers" into the community. Her diagnosis is that the Esperanto community maintains a low threshold for both factors so that the effort of learning the language is soon rewarded.

Although Esperanto is a second language *par excellence*, native speakers do exist. Normally they acquire Esperanto along with some other language(s) and are thus bilingual or multilingual by birth. Werneck and Gobbo are interested in this group. Emerson Werneck (Brazil) investigates Esperanto natives in Brazil by means of a detailed questionnaire. His sample is small, but compared to studies of individuals who are bilingual in other languages, Werneck's results display interesting differences, especially because of the diaspora situation of the Esperanto community. Like Stria, Federico Gobbo (Amsterdam, Netherlands) is interested in identity. Gobbo presents the concept of Europeanisation as coined in political science: "a European demos formed at the confluence of the European ethnicities" (Gobbo p. 137). He discusses whether and to what extent active use of Esperanto can foster this. Gobbo directs his survey at families using Esperanto in their daily life, assuming that in the event of a europeanising development they will become the societal kernel. Gobbo's results are diverse, but a prominent answer is that a clear link between Esperanto and a specifically European identity is not felt by many of his informants.

Gong Xiaofeng (Nanchang, China) compares Western and Eastern cultures of foreign-language teaching as applied to Esperanto classes in both parts of the world. Drawing on a popular book on German-Chinese cultural differences (in its schematism similar to the classical study by Galtung 1985), she gives examples of typical phrases used in standard situations as presented in textbooks and beginner lessons, showing differences in greetings, forms of address, kinship terms and basic conversational routines. More intricate intercultural issues are intertextual allusions, idioms thoughtlessly transferred from ethnic languages into Esperanto etc. Renato Corsetti (Rome, Italy) elaborates on this topic by pointing out the European cultural background contained or implied in Esperanto because the language in its first decennia developed mainly in the cultures of European origin. This is mirrored in allusions to classical Greek and Latin texts and other works widely known among educated Europeans as well as phrasemes and proverbs derived from such literature. Corsetti's observations show literary and cultural parallels to the European models of

morphology, syntax and semantics that Zamenhof tacitly took for granted (cf. Schubert 2010).

Chapter 3 “Esperanto: a language among others” comprises studies of the stage of development Esperanto has reached after some 130 years of use. Kozicki’s and Planchon’s contributions mainly look into the language system. Michał Kozicki (Poland) presents a contrastive analysis of railway terminology in Polish, English, Dutch and Esperanto. Based on specialised dictionaries, printed and online, and for Esperanto also on corpus texts, he exhibits terms from various subdomains in the four languages. The terms are in most cases accompanied by literal translations or glosses, whereby he highlights the semantic content of the words and morphemes used as distinctive markers. Unfortunately, Kozicki’s analysis does not yield a generalising conclusion or any hint at regular patterns distinguishing one language’s naming convention from the other’s. Philippe Planchon (Tours, France) wonders whether Esperanto has the means to serve as an intercultural language. He sketches different types of multilingual communication settings in a series of schemata. Planchon briefly touches upon communication models and mentions some studies on semantic differences between languages in commonly studied fields such as kinship terms or colour words.

Guilherme Fians (São Paulo, Brazil) is interested in authority vs. freedom in the development of Esperanto. He discusses how Esperanto speakers handle secondary neology, i. e. a situation in which they lack an Esperanto word for something they know in their native language. The options Fians takes up include looking words up in a dictionary, using a new loanword or making a new word on the spot. He shows the problems arising when a suggested neologism collides with an existing word. Surprisingly in his fieldwork Fians did not encounter the use of social media for discussing neological issues in the language community. Probably his study was written too early to take note of the amply documented and thoroughly written dissertation by Mélanie Maradan (2021) who evaluates large corpora of social-media discussions on Esperanto neologisms, thereby showing a vivid culture of language reflection and norm negotiating that has not been discovered by many linguists. François Lo Jacomo (Paris, France), whose dissertation *Liberté ou autorité dans l'évolution de l'espéranto* (Lo Jacomo 1981) might have been a good read for Fians, revisits the provocative book *La bona lingvo* ‘The good language’ by the Swiss interpreter and psychologist Claude Piron (1989) and pleads for non-European cultures to be accommodated and reflected in Esperanto vocabulary much more than what lay within the horizon of the first speakers of the language in the 19th century.

In an empirical study, Marcos Cramer (Dresden, Germany) investigates the use of gender-neutral pronouns and expressions in Esperanto. Interestingly, the issue was discussed already in Zamenhof’s day, especially the idea that *ĝi* ‘it’, normally used for objects, could be used to denote a generic individual, but in the early years of Esperanto this was discouraged. From the late 1970s on, a new pronoun *ri* was proposed for the purpose. Cramer reports on an online questionnaire survey carried out in 2019 in which *ri* was understood by a large majority of the respondents, but in active use it

came only in the fourth place after *tiu* 'that one', *li* 'he' (the traditional solution), *li aŭ ŝi* 'he or she' / *ŝi aŭ li* 'she or he' with *ĝi* 'it', avoidance and *ŝi* 'she' following with lower frequency. Not surprisingly, the frequency of *ri* is highest among the youngest speakers and zero among the oldest. Cramer concludes that *ri* at this point in time is widely used, but cannot yet be considered a fully fledged element of the language system.

Starting from the assumption that in spontaneous oral Esperanto, speakers are influenced by their native language, Natalia Dankova (Outaouais, Canada) compares Esperanto narratives by native speakers of French, Italian and Russian. Parameters of her investigation are time and time relations as expressed in tense forms, adverbs and temporal words. Further aspect and aktionsarten, adverbs of time and transition etc. Dankova's valuable approach is enlightening especially for the question how a linguistic norm is established and maintained. It would be worthwhile to carry out more studies of this kind with a broader scope comprising more features of language use and content structuring, including both oral and written text production and underpinning its results with sample texts by informants with typologically more diverse native languages.

For the study of intercultural communication, the experience of Esperanto is particularly interesting, since the community supporting and maintaining the language is altogether intercultural. The processes of setting and negotiating a norm and of accommodating the life realities of individuals and communities from all over the world are at the core of the development of Esperanto. Therefore, studies like those by Stria and Dankova are especially enlightening and particularly welcome, as they go beyond just showing and describing their object of study, but apply the methods of general linguistics to elaborate on the specifics of this intrinsically intercultural form of human interaction.

The editors are to be congratulated for this comprehensive and well-prepared volume.

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