

# **Bringing constructed languages back to the debate: The contributions of interlinguistics to general linguistics**

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## **Abstract**

In the first half of the twentieth century, the fields of interlinguistics and Esperanto studies emerged as branches of linguistics focused on the study of languages designed for international communication (such as Volapük, Esperanto, and Ido). Yet, why are there specific fields to study language creation and why should linguists care about this? Looking at the history of constructed languages, this article explores the institutionalization of interlinguistics by focusing on the history of the Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems (CED, in its Esperanto acronym), a research center founded in 1952 whose developments encapsulate certain aspects of this broader narrative. From an analysis of CED's 44<sup>th</sup> Esperanto Studies Conference, in 2022, I flesh out the potential of interlinguistics to contribute back to linguistics and to the humanities disciplines that originated it. Ultimately, this article calls for the reinsertion of constructed languages into general linguistics debates.

## **Introduction**

Over forty years after Esperanto was created, Otto Jespersen (1931) consolidated interlinguistics as the field of linguistics oriented towards the study of languages designed for international communication. From Volapük to Esperanto and Ido, these languages are frequently referred to as planned languages, constructed languages, or international auxiliary languages<sup>1</sup>. A similar move marked Esperanto studies, a field formalized by Eugen Wüster (1942) and Paul Neergaard (1955). Yet, why are there specific fields to study language creation and why should linguists care about this?

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<sup>1</sup> International auxiliary languages are a subset of constructed/planned languages. For clarification on the terminology, see Blanke (2018). Although Detlev Blanke employs the term 'planned language', here I choose 'constructed language' to emphasise the growing importance of fictional languages produced for artistic purposes (like Elvish and Klingon).

In the second half of the twentieth century, as the theoretical framework of generative grammar gained ground in formal linguistics (Chomsky 2002 [1957]), general linguistics increased its emphasis on natural language processing, leaving constructed languages out of its mainstream research themes. Against this background, interlinguistics and Esperanto studies set up spaces where such languages could gain prominence as research objects. Nonetheless, these fields also consolidated constructed languages as topics for interlinguists – and interlinguists only, given that, beyond these realms, general linguistics would afford no room to practices of language engineering.

This article explores some aspects of the institutionalization of interlinguistics and Esperanto studies throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, highlighting these fields' latest developments. To do so, I focus on the history of the Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems (whose Esperanto acronym, CED, stands for *Centro de Esploro kaj Dokumentado pri Mondaj Lingvaj Problemoj*), a research center founded in 1952 whose developments encapsulate certain aspects of this broader history. While interlinguistics has emerged from theories and arguments from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, history, literature studies, translation studies, and intercultural communication, to what extent does interlinguistics contribute back to the fields that originated it? From an analysis of the 44<sup>th</sup> Esperanto Studies Conference held by CED in Canada, in 2022, this article seeks to flesh out the potential of interlinguistics, ultimately calling for the reinsertion of constructed languages into general linguistics as a way of keeping this theoretical and analytical conversation going.

### **The birth of interlinguistics and Esperanto studies**

Although language creation may be occasionally perceived as a pastime for eccentrics (Garvía 2015: 163-164), this activity once received wide attention in the West. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the replacement of the telegraph by the telephone, the development of electric and diesel locomotives, the flight of the first powered airplane, and the internationalization of postal services and steamship routes (Müller 2016). Combined with European imperialist expansion, these technological development boosted international trade and enabled Europeans to more easily and frequently cross borders.

Yet this wave of globalization depended not on technologies alone: it also hinged on languages. After all, when journalists or scientists from different countries lifted the receiver from the telephone hook or when businesspeople and explorers crossed continents on speedy diesel trains, how would they communicate with people from different linguistic backgrounds and no (or little) knowledge of hegemonic European languages? To address this issue, several proposals emerged, prompting either the use of a national language (such as French or English) for international communication or the creation of a new language to serve this purpose. This is where language creation gained certain visibility in Western intellectual scenarios and political agendas.

These matters were taken up by linguists, who sought to help solve the world's communicative constraints through language policies. Bringing together policymakers, diplomats, and linguists, the European-based Delegation for the Adoption of an International Auxiliary Language was created in 1900 to choose and advance one of the several existing constructed

languages<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, in 1922, the newly established League of Nations formed a commission to discuss the introduction of a constructed language in school curricula (Nitobe 1998). Such debates also gained ground in the US in 1924, with the International Auxiliary Language Association (Fettes 2001). Interlinguistics was then framed as a form of applied linguistics, aimed at addressing the then called ‘world language problem’ (Meysmans 1911-1912; Kuznecov 1989).

However, this scenario changed when, by the mid-twentieth century, constructed languages had lost momentum and failed to gather as many speakers as such institutions expected (Garvía 2015: 152). Things also changed among linguists when the search for a universal language largely gave way to the search for language universals. The then flourishing theoretical framework of generative grammar focused on natural languages, analyzing how people applied their cognitive structures to build grammatical sentences in the language concerned (Chomsky 2006). However, constructed languages such as Esperanto do not easily fit the label ‘natural language’. Aside from Esperanto having few explicit grammatical rules, people who speak this language from birth do not conform to the idealized perception of what a native speaker is (Miner 2011), which led formal linguistics to perceive Esperanto as a language parasitic on others (see Fians 2021: 1-2) rather than a fully-fledged language.

Having largely dropped its applied character from the second half of the twentieth century, interlinguistics remained focused on the study of constructed languages and their use for international communication (Schubert 1989). While mainstream linguistic approaches seemed to cast constructed languages aside, relegating them to a secondary position among minor topics of sociolinguistics, interlinguistics became increasingly consolidated as a comfort zone for researchers interested in exploring these languages and the social phenomena revolving around them. The same applied to Esperanto Studies (Neergaard 1942; Wüster 1955), an offshoot of interlinguistics centered on the most widely used constructed language. Unsurprisingly, Esperanto – which was initiated in 1887 in the Russian Empire, quickly gained popularity over its then competitor Volapük, and survived two World Wars – is also the constructed language most analysed by scholars (Gobbo 2022; Fiedler forthcoming).

In interlinguistics and Esperanto studies, scholars (as well as language activists with little background in linguistics) research translation in constructed languages, vocabulary development, the political history of language movements, the social history of individual speakers and their transnational trajectories, and the links between constructed languages and social movements, language planning, minority languages, and linguistic justice, among several other themes (see Tonkin 1987; Barandovská-Frank 2018). Recent decades have also seen growing dialogue between studies on international auxiliary languages and research on computer programming languages and fictional languages such as Elvish, Klingon, and Na’vi (see Goodall 2023).

It is worth noting that a significant portion of these studies has historically been published in Esperanto (see, despite only partly evidenced, Barandovská-Frank 1995). While fostering multilingual scholarship within present-day English-centered academia, this choice of working

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<sup>2</sup> Constructed languages do not necessarily aim at cross-border communication – see, for instance, the philosophical languages analysed by Eco (1994).

language constrains access to this scholarship to those with language skills and confirmed interest in Esperanto.

### **The birth of CED**

The Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems (hereafter CED, as per the Esperanto acronym of CED's original name, Centro de Esploro kaj Dokumentado) was founded in 1952 by Ivo Lapenna. Currently headquartered in Rotterdam (Netherlands), CED was envisaged as a scholarly division of the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA). CED promotes scientific research on Esperanto and its applications, compiles and publishes documentation on 'world language problems', and supports efforts to present reliable data on Esperanto to international organizations, scholarly bodies, and the public (Lapenna 1974; Fettes forthcoming).

At its outset, CED sought to give visibility to Esperanto amidst researchers and reputable research institutions whose interests and goals aligned with those of UEA – namely, the promotion of cross-border mutual understanding through language comprehension. In line with Lapenna's prestige policy (Forster 1982), while UEA managed to garner the support of the UN and UNESCO in 1954, CED would build bridges between Esperanto and academia by producing and encouraging research on intercultural and international communication, language issues in multilingual organizations, and the role that Esperanto played/could play in these scenarios. In this way, CED's work sought to draw scholarly attention to Esperanto and constructed languages as matters worthy of study.

Still in its early years, CED's original title (Centro de Esploro kaj Dokumentado) changed to Centro de Esploro kaj Dokumentado pri la Monda Lingva Problemo – with 'world language problem' in the singular. Only in the late 1970s was the title changed to the current one, Centro de Esploro kaj Dokumentado pri Mondaj Lingvaj Problemoj. Even though the pluralization of 'world language problems' may seem trivial, it reflected a significant shift in perspective in the field. Up until the 1970s, interlinguists identified a single world language problem, presumably with a single solution (here, Lapenna saw Esperanto as this potential solution). In part thanks to the growth of language policy as a field, it became increasingly evident that there were several world language problems. Ranging from barriers preventing international communication to linguistic imperialism and language discrimination (Phillipson 1992), addressing these issues required distinct initiatives and policies, and the change in CED's title echoed this new perspective<sup>3</sup>.

Over the decades, CED developed its activities along four core fields (CED 2023), the first being interlinguistics and Esperanto studies. Here, a key initial undertaking was the publication of Lapenna's book *La Internacia Lingvo: Faktoj pri Esperanto* (1954), with arguments to fight misinformation about Esperanto among academics. In the following years, CED compiled historical, sociological, and statistical studies on Esperanto, which were published in a series of *CED Documents (CED-Dokumentoj)*. In-depth analyses of the *CED Documents* culminated in the volume *Esperanto en Perspektivo* (Lapenna, Lins and Carlevaro 1974), a comprehensive (although no longer updated) survey of the history of Esperanto organizations, literature, and

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<sup>3</sup> I thank Humphrey Tonkin for explaining to me the significance of these title changes.

periodicals, as well as cultural, commercial, and political arenas where the language played a role.

In the same year, 1974, CED launched the newsletter *Informilo por Interlingvistoj*, with regular updates on the latest developments in these fields, it had also a German version (*Interlinguistische Informationen*: 1996-2016) and 23 yearbooks thanks to the dedicated work of Detlev Blanke. CED continues to produce this newsletter, now in a bilingual form, as *Informilo por Interlingvistoj / Information for Interlinguists*. Creating arenas for scholarly debates, CED has convened the Esperanto Studies Conferences, which take place in Esperanto within the scope of the annual World Esperanto Congresses, as of 1978. More recently, in 2019, CED took up the editorship of the journal *Esperantologio / Esperanto Studies* (EES). Founded in 1949, EES publishes articles, research notes, and book reviews mostly in Esperanto and English, but it also welcomes contributions in other languages, with a view to making Esperanto studies scholarship more multilingual.

CED's second scope of action concerns the advancement of these fields at universities. In this regard, CED contributes to sponsoring the Chair in Esperanto and Interlinguistics at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands) and provides support to the postgraduate program in Interlinguistic Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland). CED also offers small grants to fund conference organization, conference attendance, and publications on Esperanto, language planning, intercultural communication, and linguistic justice. Additionally, in 2022, CED launched its mentorship program, with senior scholars assisting early career researchers who venture into the topics covered by the research center. Most of these programs stem from a long-standing collaboration with the US-based Esperantic Studies Foundation (ESF).

CED's third field of action relates to fleshing out the connections between language planning and planned languages. Language policies often concern deliberate interventions to modify the structure and use of languages for particular purposes – such as the sixteenth-century application of Western writing systems to indigenous languages in the Americas or the late-nineteenth-century revival of Hebrew. Given that planned languages are extreme cases of language planning, CED strives to include constructed languages in policy debates. For this purpose, in 1969 CED launched the journal *La Monda Lingvo-Problemo*, which later became *Language Problems and Language Planning* (LPLP) – currently one of the most prestigious journals on language policies. Additionally, as of 1996, CED organizes the Nitobe Symposia, primarily in English, aimed at convening researchers, policymakers, politicians, and language activists.

CED's fourth scope of action concerns libraries and archives. In this regard, CED liaises between the Hector Hodler Library (Rotterdam) and the Austrian National Library (Vienna) – holders of the largest collections of Esperanto-related documents and publications. The research center also encourages language activists to preserve and, eventually, make publicly available their collections of books, letters, and postcards. These primary sources enable researchers to reconstitute the trajectories of constructed language speakers and activists across borders and through multilingualism.

Throughout its undertakings, CED works mostly in Esperanto and English, while also keeping its publications, conferences, and funding program open to contributions in other languages.

### **CED and the work of bringing constructed languages back to the table**

Since 1952, CED has been under the direction of Ivo Lapenna (1952-1973), Jonathan Pool (1974-1980), and Humphrey Tonkin (1980-2020). Since 2020, CED is headed by Mark Fettes, who chairs the board of directors consisting of Humphrey Tonkin, Guilherme Fians, Michele Gazzola, Snehaja Venkatesh, and Klaus Schubert.

After seven decades of funding research projects, supporting scholars, publishing journals, and holding conferences, CED marked its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the 44<sup>th</sup> Esperanto Studies Conference (*Esperantologia Konferenco*), at the Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada), in August 2022, within the scope of the 107<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Esperanto.

This edition of the conference involved a session to celebrate CED's anniversary, two sessions of talks on interlinguistics and Esperanto studies, and a debate on the acceptance (or dismissal) of Esperanto as a research topic in academia. This hybrid conference attracted over 40 simultaneous participants on-site and online.

The first session included talks by Mark Fettes (Simon Fraser University), Sabine Fiedler (Universität Leipzig), Grant Goodall (University of California San Diego), and Jonathan Pool (CVS Health). Fettes<sup>4</sup> examined how CED has encouraged research in Esperanto studies as a way of battling misinformation about constructed languages in academia. This opening talk was followed by Fiedler's, on the use of Esperanto to trigger debates about grassroots linguistic justice in university classrooms. As Fiedler showed, in cases of interpersonal communication in multilingual settings, the language used as *lingua franca* may not be English, but rather French, Japanese, a pidgin, or even a constructed language. In multilingual settings, using a person's first language to communicate with someone from a different linguistic background may create an unbalanced situation, in which the non-native speaker must make an extra effort to reach out to the native speaker.

Highlighting the potential of interlinguistics to disrupt theoretical assumptions about language learning, Goodall's talk opened with the personal communication between Noam Chomsky and Probal Dasgupta on Esperanto. As Chomsky explained to Dasgupta, rather than dismissing Esperanto in his oft-cited statement 'Esperanto is not a language' (see Fians 2021: 1-2), Chomsky simply meant that Esperanto does not conform to the working definition of language deployed by the generative grammar approach. If this is the case, could not interlinguistics scholarship contribute to a reappraisal of formal linguistics?

Next, Pool introduced the audience to several lesser-known websites and apps offering voice recording and translation from and into Esperanto. His talk illustrated how computational linguistics helped popularize Esperanto on the internet and how this language has played a role in machine translation, being 'learned' by people and machines alike.

The two subsequent sessions involved Gabriel Labrie (Université de Montréal), myself (Guilherme Fians, University of St Andrews), and Davide Astori (Università degli studi di Parma) discussing theoretical approaches in interlinguistics, as well as Christer Kiselman (Uppsala universitet), Bernhard Tuidler (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek), and Pascal

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these talks will be published in article form in *Esperantologio / Esperanto Studies* 4(12) (forthcoming, 2023), a special issue celebrating CED's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Dubourg-Glatigny (Centre national de la recherche scientifique) communicating their linguistic and archival findings on the history of Esperanto.

Astori began by analyzing the use of constructed languages in his linguistics lectures at Parma as an entryway to challenge the natural language/artificial language divide and to discuss deliberate interventions within the scope of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Labrie, in turn, brought linguistic tropism to debates on constructed languages. In biology, tropism concerns the movement of plants in response to environmental stimuli – such as when trees grow towards the sun. Similarly, in linguistics, francotropism refers to how someone’s key linguistic and cultural references stem from French (even in cases when French is not one’s first language). Along these lines, could linguistic tropism contribute to the study of people whose key references derive from a constructed language? Despite the risks of importing a biological notion into linguistics<sup>5</sup>, this approach invites us to consider how constructed language speakers can regularly communicate these references when most of these speakers’ everyday interactions involve people who do not speak these languages.

Next, my paper (later published in Fians 2022) urged interlinguists to bring down the disciplinary barriers that isolate interlinguistics and Esperanto studies and to reintegrate these fields into mainstream linguistics. Could not studies in interlinguistics be of relevance to scholars who are not necessarily interested in Esperanto and, in this way, provide a basis for us to challenge broader theoretical approaches in linguistics and the humanities?

Opening the conference’s final section, Kiselman presented his latest book (Kiselman 2022) on how Yiddish influenced the four language projects developed by Zamenhof: Lingwe Uniwersala, Lingvo Universala, Mondo Lingo, and Lingvo Internacia de D-ro Esperanto.

Particularly engaging were Tuider’s and Dubourg-Glatigny’s remarks encouraging ordinary Esperanto speakers to perceive their language learning notebooks and Esperanto correspondence as potential primary sources to be used by historians. Even the viewpoints of ordinary Esperanto speakers may reveal overlooked aspects of the Esperanto-speaking community and movement. Tuider illustrated this argument with documents from the Austrian National Library, while Dubourg-Glatigny narrated the recently reconstructed itinerary of Lucien Péraire, an Esperanto-speaking world traveler from the French working classes.

Interestingly, this edition of the Esperanto Studies Conference brought together early career researchers (such as Labrie) and key actors in the discipline (like Kiselman, who for years organized these conferences). The intergenerational dialogue this academic space created conveys a sense of renovation and continuity that hints at CED’s hopes for the future.

### **Coda: The double rebirth of interlinguistics**

Emerging from applied linguistics and later settling as a separate, rather segregated field, interlinguistics now seems to face two sets of challenges. Firstly, while several scholars seek to strengthen interlinguistics and Esperanto studies as research fields in their own right, others

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<sup>5</sup> The same risk applies to the abovementioned biology-inspired distinction between natural and artificial/constructed languages.

strive to integrate them with general linguistics and the humanities. Secondly, while many produce and communicate knowledge in Esperanto to reach out to and dialogue with Esperanto speakers (the key stakeholders of these findings), others prefer to produce knowledge about Esperanto in languages more widely used in academia. These binaries portray, twice, the double rebirth of interlinguistics: on the one hand, a field that emerges as a stand-alone quasi-discipline *versus* a series of studies on constructed languages that directly fit general linguistics, literature studies, sociology, history, anthropology, and intercultural communication; on the other hand, projects, conferences, and publications whose working language is primarily the researched language or the ‘languages of science’.

While scientific progress can take place through the search for consensus, it often results from controversy and disagreement. Hence CED seeks to create an intellectual space in which a diversity of views can be presented and debated, which entails encouraging interlinguistics done in many languages and aimed at diverse sets of interlocutors. What remains a trademark of CED’s activities is the research center’s commitment to multilingualism, which begins with the way in which researchers from across the world gather, collaborate, and co-produce knowledge in and through Esperanto.

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