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Esperanto: A Language Policy Assessment[1]

Abstrakt (Esperanto: Ocena polityki językowej). W przeciwieństwie do większości projektantów planowych języków międzynarodowych twórca Esperanto L.L. Zamenhof był tak samo zainteresowany planowaniem statusu jak planowaniem korpusu. Projekt Zamenhofa był na tyle kompletny, by można go było wykorzystać jako środek komunikacji, ale na tyle niepełny, aby umożliwić społeczności esperantystów wykonanie dużej części pracy nad przekształceniem projektu we w pełni rozwinięty język. Sam Zamenhof postrzegał ten język jako środek do celu i dość wcześnie powierzył rozwój języka jego użytkownikom, podczas gdy on sam dążył do wyższych celów ideologicznych. Niedawno badacze zwrócili uwagę na ideologiczną stronę społeczności esperanckiej w ogóle, w tym na silne zaangażowanie esperantystów w językową sprawiedliwość i większą świadomość wartości wielojęzyczności i różnorodności językowej.

Abstract. Unlike most projectors of planned international languages, the creator of Esperanto, L.L. Zamenhof, was as interested in status planning as in corpus planning. Zamenhof's project was complete enough to be used as a means of communication, but incomplete enough to allow the community of Esperanto speakers to do much of the work of turning his project into a full-fledged language. Zamenhof himself saw the language as a means to an end, and, quite early on, entrusted the development of the language to its speakers while he pursued more lofty ideological goals. Recently scholars have turned their attention to the ideological side of the Esperanto community in general, including the strong commitment of Esperanto speakers to linguistic justice and to a greater awareness of the value of multilingualism and linguistic diversity.

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1. Existing vs. planned languages: Parallels

A recent sharp increase in scholarly interest in the history of Esperanto[2] prompts an assessment of the linguistic, societal, and political influence of this language movement over its 130 years of existence, particularly in its intersection with language policy and planning. Traditionally, students of language planning draw a clear distinction between the planning of existing ethnic languages and the construction of entire planned languages. Corpus planning of an existing language is very different from the corpus planning of a planned language like Esperanto; and status planning of a language already in existence is different from the promotion of a fully constructed, but not yet current, language. Or is it? A few linguists, most notably Valter Tauli (1968) and Eugen Wüster (1931; and see Gobbo 2009), have discerned parallels between the two, or used lessons learned from constructed languages by applying them to corpus planning in existing languages. And status planning of planned languages resembles language cultivation in existing languages, particularly instances of language revival – the case of Cornish for example (Kimura, 2010, 2012), or Te Reo Maori (Krägeloh & Neha 2014).

So it is worth taking a look at Esperanto if only because others are doing so, and also because it is important to assess it as a linguistic phenomenon and not simply as an idea or a proposal, utopian or otherwise.

2. Language and community

In an earlier paper on a related topic (Tonkin 2015), I remarked that when the Polish doctor Lazar Ludvik Zamenhof launched his language in Warsaw in 1887 (as a young 28-year-old), he did so with a lively awareness of the relationship between the planning of corpus and the planning of status. While there have been plenty of attempts to create a world language over the years, nuanced in different ways and with different purposes (Okrent 2009), Zamenhof seems to have been unique in understanding that *proposing* a language requires far more than simply *composing* it. There is also the problem of *imposing* it – creating a body of speakers. A language that is all corpus and no status cannot survive: most inventors of languages, like most utopianists, are reluctant to lose control, reluctant to plan community as well as verbs. Influenced by the more progressive linguistic ideas of his day, particularly those of the Polish linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay, Zamenhof understood that a language is sustained by its speakers: without a language community a language is a mere idea, a plaything, a project. A living language (if I may be allowed that metaphor) is used by living beings. So the problem

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[2]   E.g. Schor 2016, Garvía 2015, Lins 2016, Lins 2017, Gordin 2015, and Humphrey Tonkin & Veronika Poór, *The Phenomenon of Esperanto*, special issue of the journal *INDECS: Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems*, 2015.

of planning a corpus is just the beginning: a language community must follow. Such a community is messy, individualistic, and hard to control. Striking the right balance between anarchy and direction is hard, but, partly through happenstance, such a balance did emerge in the case of Esperanto, perhaps aided by some of the existential crises that it faced in its early days. While Umberto Eco (1995) rightly includes Esperanto in his study of the search for a perfect language, Zamenhof and his followers wisely chose practicality over perfection.

Indeed the perfect is the enemy of the good. Interestingly, the more complete and rigid the corpus (the more complete the language as a system) the greater the challenge of status – a problem encountered early in the history of contemporary language planning, when over-ambitious language standardization efforts repeatedly ran afoul of persistent language practices. Zamenhof offered a language complete enough to be used as a means of communication, but he created a relatively small vocabulary, and he left issues of semantics fairly open (he chose to legislate meaning only to a limited degree), thereby offering his earliest adepts a language that was complete enough to function but incomplete enough to allow for the coinage of new words, the refinement of expression and definition, and the collective development of stylistic norms – in short, what language planners call *elaboration* (Kaplan & Baldauf 1997: 43-48; the term was created by Haugen). While there are numbers of studies of Zamenhof's use of the language, there has been little or no work on the *collective* development of the language in those early years; though the fact that the language emerged first and foremost as a *written* language – thereby reversing our assumptions about the genesis of language – means that we have good early records of language use. Today, the vast majority of the lexical elements in the language are the results of usage by individuals other than Zamenhof: most of the vocabulary has entered the language since Zamenhof's time or through his contemporaries.

3. Idealism and ideologies

It is difficult to separate Zamenhof's ideals from the language itself, but important that we do so. Coming to Esperanto from a protracted interest in Zionism (Zamenhof was among the earliest Zionists but grew disillusioned with the movement) and heavily influenced by the persecution of Jews in the Russian empire, Zamenhof saw Esperanto as a language of peace – a means of bridging conflicts in which language was an issue and in promoting understanding (Korzhenkov 2010, 2011; Garvía 2015: 59-64). We may have many different views on the feasibility of such an endeavor, and many are those who have argued that a common language may increase understanding, but the kind of understanding that sets in when the combatants fully comprehend that they do indeed hate one another. However, Zamenhof, in his more idealistic moments, saw Esperanto as a means to an end, beyond mere linguistic understanding, that end being a gradual

sense of religious community, a kind of pan-spiritualism overarching religious diversity. In this regard he was not supported by the vast majority of Esperanto speakers, whose ideas were more modest (Garvía 2015). Indeed, the closer one looks at the Esperanto movement as a whole, the clearer it becomes that there are fewer common strands in Esperantist thinking than one might suppose. Esperantists may be more united in what they do *not* assume than in what they actually assume about language.

In a sense, Zamenhof was engaged in re-engineering Yiddish. This language of the Jews, spoken by a diasporic people over large swaths of Europe and beyond, lacked standardization, was devoid of prestige, had only the vaguest of geographical centers; but it lived in the desire of people to speak it, not least because it was bound up with their identity. It was a language that the young Zamenhof loved: in his years as a medical student in Moscow he wrote a grammar of Yiddish, which survived in manuscript and was published long after his death. It is one of the earliest such recorded efforts.

Zamenhof's interest in Yiddish, known simply as "the jargon" by the late nineteenth century, was perhaps what prompted his awareness of the importance of prestige in a language. He used Latin as his linguistic model; his first major translation was *Hamlet*. Much of what he and his followers chose as priorities was directed at promoting the language as a serious enterprise – an undertaking made difficult in a sense by the sheer originality of Zamenhof's project and his refusal to adopt received ideas about language..

4. Confronting received opinion on language

The Esperantist counter-cultural lack of acceptance of received opinion about language is in a sense what makes the phenomenon of Esperanto particularly interesting. Historians have traced the rise in popularity of Esperanto in the years preceding World War I, its recovery in the idealistic battles following World War I, its decimation in the Holocaust and the Stalinist purges, and its re-emergence after World War II. Many of those who learned the language learned just enough of it to get by: a study particularly of unpublished texts would, I suspect, reveal that there were many whose knowledge of the language extended only as far as the language was useful to them, and no further. The letter and spirit of standard Esperanto and its development as a language of literature and self-expression has always been limited to a fairly small fraction of the total of Esperanto users and speakers.

But the other side of that coin is that, over the years, the language has attracted the interest of literally millions of people, many of whom learned and used the language, some becoming its advocates, and a considerable number, having learned it fully or partially, losing their interest, moving on to other things, and sometimes entering and exiting the movement several times during their lives. As a linguistic and ideological phenomenon, and as an exercise in status planning, the importance of Esperanto

far exceeds its numerical importance at any one time (to the extent that we can ever count the number of Esperantists) and includes the way in which it has touched huge numbers of people.

One way of thinking about the phenomenon is to reflect on the many millions of people who have learned French in British schools, or Spanish in American schools. While for most such learners French or Spanish never become idioms that they readily use, or are even capable of using, for some this introduction to the language in question serves as a stepping stone to practical use, and for others it does at least expose them to linguistic diversity. At what point do such people become statistics as speakers of these languages?[3]

Now imagine that there *are* no native speakers of French or Spanish, only L2 learners of these languages.[4] Where, then, do these languages reside? The community of Esperantists resides where learners of the language turn into practical users, and most users of Esperanto continue the process of language acquisition in a more active way than native speakers continue to acquire their languages into adulthood. Thus, finding the ideal speaker, establishing the language of the fluent Esperantist, becomes a perilous occupation: most Esperantists are still learning.

5. Identifying the language

This vagueness, the diffused nature of the phenomenon itself, has led to its neglect by active scholars. Languages with large groups of native speakers offer a more dependable laboratory, a more coherent language community, where norms are more easily discernible. Studying a language consisting only of L2, L3 or L4 speakers is a particular challenge. But the point that I want to emphasize is that literally millions of people have, over the past 128 years, learned at least some of the language, and large numbers have put it to practical use, each contributing to its development perhaps more actively than would be the case in a firmly established ethnic language with a long history. (The best parallels here might be the emergence of Bahasa Indonesia, or the early days of Modern Hebrew in Palestine.)

Of course, today, with our awareness of "trans-languaging," our consciousness of the fact that many, maybe most, people across the world live in a multilingual environment, and our realization that major languages, particularly English, have many established

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[3]   Esperanto has never gained a strong position as a schools subject, except in relatively isolated instances (the Greek islands before World War I; parts of Yugoslavia in the 1950s). See Charters 2015.

[4]   There are in fact some native speakers of Esperanto, generally the children of couples with different first languages who use Esperanto as the language of the home. But the usage of these native speakers has relatively little influence on Esperanto usage in general, and they are all of them at least bilingual as soon as they enter school.

or emerging varieties, we are less apt to see individual languages as monolithic. So perhaps it is possible to imagine the study of the emergence of a language over a century and a quarter by reference to all its speakers in all their manifestations.

Unlike most language movements, the Esperanto movement has no geographical base, no readily identifiable target for its advocacy, and little precedent for its activities. I will say a word about each of these points.

The lack of a geographical base is obvious. While the largest number of speakers seems to have been, and remains, the continent of Europe, Esperanto intersected with Chinese anarchism and the Romanization movement in China in the early years of the twentieth century and the 1920s (Müller-Saini & Benton 2006a, 2006b), and it played a significant role in the modernization movement in Japan (Konishi 2015). Early on, it established itself in Brazil, and today the traditional Esperanto movement continues to move forward in Africa.

6. Esperanto and nationalism

As for advocacy, Zamenhof never saw Esperanto as replacing other languages, but serving as a kind of interlanguage among existing languages. Finding a political toehold for such an idea was easier in the early years of the language when the rivalry of English, French and German was at its most intense – primarily in the period before the German defeat in 1918/19, when German's use as the language of science plummeted, later accelerated by the tyranny of the Hitler regime (Gordin 2015). It was perhaps easier when French and English were engaged in a similar rivalry between the wars. Indeed, the French government's vehement opposition to Esperanto led to its rejection as a serious proposition in the League of Nations. It was primarily Esperanto's opposition to the emergence of nationalism that both animated and doomed Esperanto's political influence during these years: to an extraordinary degree the Third Reich worked hard to eradicate Esperanto as "the language of the Jews," as Hitler put it, but also as an inconvenient challenge to German nationalism and superiority (Lins 2016). And in Russia, when Lenin's belief in international socialism and world revolution (views readily adaptable to Esperanto) gave way to his successor Stalin's Soviet nationalism with its strong emphasis on the Russian language, the Esperantists were left high and dry, ready to be picked off in the Great Purges of the late 1930s, when thousands of Esperantists were banished or executed and the language disappeared from view for twenty years, to re-emerge only after Stalin's death (Lins 2016, 2017).

But anti-nationalism was by no means universal among Esperantists, even in this period of intense popular nationalism. Indeed the movement was sharply divided between "neutralist" bourgeois Esperantists who avoided taking political positions, and Esperantists engaged in the emancipatory struggle of the working classes, deeply skeptical of authority and militantly opposed to nationalist manifestations.

It is the history of the internal ideological battles of the Esperantists, particularly between the wars, that is currently attracting particular attention (Garvía 2015, Gordin 2015; Lins 2016, 2017). Behind these battles we can discern (1) the maneuvers of a language movement to define a policy of engagement with the larger world, and (2) its efforts to influence the policies that it finds in that world, particularly through engagement with social movements and efforts to change language policies in international organizations: the League of Nations and, more recently, the United Nations, UNESCO, and the European Union. Such efforts have double significance: they are directed outwards towards political engagement, but they are also directed inwards as a means of maintaining a sense of solidarity, enthusiasm, and urgency.

7. Esperanto and linguistic justice

Today there is no single target at which Esperanto's idealism is aimed. However, there is more original thinking going on among Esperantists today about linguistic discrimination than many people are aware of. In a recent speech to the annual Italian Esperanto conference, the Canadian scholar Mark Fettes, who also serves as president of the Universal Esperanto Association, reiterated a point made a year ago at a language symposium in New York, namely that language is almost never raised as a substantive issue in studies of sustainable development (Fettes 2015). In eighteen "think pieces" published on the website of the Millennium Development Goals, language was mentioned in passing only four times, mostly in connection with the link between language and ethnic identity, and linguistic diversity as an asset received no mention at all. None of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals that the UN has established to replace the expiring Millennium Development Goals alludes to language. One of the watchwords of the framers of these goals is that "no one should be left behind" – in other words, the improvements envisioned in the Goals should extend to all. But the framers do not expand that watchword to cover the suggestion that "all voices should be heard." It is one thing to improve people's lot, but quite another to engage the people in question in the design of those improvements. An NGO summit on the Sustainable Development Goals set for the end of September 2015 included the stipulation that all participants should be competent in English – yet the goals themselves are largely directed at people who are not competent in English and often not even competent in the official languages of the states in which they reside.

(If this failure to recognize the importance of language can be laid at the door of the Esperantists because they were present in the room at the time and raised no protest, the lack of advocacy on the part of organizations and experts in language policy and planning, who apparently were not in the room at all, is even more culpable: as a profession we have a lot to answer for.)

While we should avoid generalizing about the interests of Esperantists, there can be no doubt that linkage between language and other social concerns has always been

a principal element in the status planning of Esperantists and Esperanto organizations. It is perhaps significant that, a year ahead of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the new constitution of the Universal Esperanto Association, written in the wake of World War II, stated that observance of human rights "as they are generally recognized" was "an essential condition" for the work of the Association.

There is little or no precedent for many of the activities of the international Esperanto movement. No other invented or constructed language (and there have been many) has even come close to its breadth and depth. Most scholars attribute this relative success (and it *is* a success in the sense that Esperanto has created a sustainable language movement or community, even if it has not found general acceptance [Blanke 2009]) to Zamenhof's awareness of the importance of creating a linguistic community that owns the language. But perhaps Esperanto's greatest weakness is the sheer quantity of energy that has to be expended to *maintain* the movement – a communication system, a publishing operation that cuts across national lines of marketing and distribution, a constant need to cultivate the language. And, like the Shakers, few Esperantists are born (that tiny number of perhaps a thousand L1 speakers to which I referred earlier); most have to be recruited.

In another sense, of course, this weakness constitutes a strength: the speakers of Esperanto are busily engaged in creating and maintaining their own institutions, which has an effect on the development of their language and produces a kind of ideological urgency in some quarters or a desire for community in others. Another of the traditional divides in the Esperanto movement is that between those who see their language as constituting a linguistic minority and those who see it as a means to an ideological end (Tonkin 2006: 21-26).

8. Conclusion

What lessons can scholars of language policy carry away from this history, and what does the future hold for this tiny movement in an increasingly anglicized world?

The history of Esperanto is a chronicle of success and failure, as is the case in most social movements. As for its situation today, scholars are divided on its relative currency. There are those who see the decay of the traditional movement – membership organizations, national affiliates, local clubs, and the rest – as a sign of the decay of the movement as a whole. A recent study of the Croatian Esperanto association traces such a pattern of decline (Puškar 2015). But there are those who, recognizing the processes of globalization that have changed the relations among languages in increasingly profound ways, intertwining the global and the local (Blommaert 2010), note the migration of activity away from traditional organizational structures towards a rapidly expanding, multifaceted, web-based community (Wandel 2015). With 218,000 articles as of 2015, the Esperanto Wikipedia is 34th in the world in terms of size; despite the regular purging

of inactive participants, the instructional website *Lernu.net* has now grown to around 300,000 members, and the new Esperanto program launched by the language-learning site Duolingo two years ago has over a million learners. Esperanto is ideally suited for a decentralized community, indeed is an example of the intertwining of local and global long before that became the electronic norm; the web has drastically improved its ability to thrive.

This ability to function is not dependent on a larger sense of social viability: the world of Esperanto is already self-sufficient and will likely remain so into the foreseeable future. Less clear is its ability to influence current international trends in the world of languages, above all as an advocate for multilingualism, or linguistic pluralism, as an absolute good, and as a means of reminding the world that if English is the language of prestige, those at the opposite end of the line – those without prestige and standing – go unheard and neglected (see the introduction to Ricento 2006). This point is worth repeating: far from advocating unilingualism, as some critics assume, the majority of Esperantists favor its opposite – linguistic diversity and multilingualism.

While linguists may find much to study in the Esperanto language (issues of language change, first-language speakers, typological characteristics, planned language, etc.), it is perhaps the Esperanto *movement* that holds the most interest for specialists in language policy. One thing is certain: in the present environment, in which the clear boundaries that we once believed made up the map of languages have become blurred and overlapping, the phenomenon of Esperanto is notably easier for the established scholar to study. It is a linguistic phenomenon that questions our assumptions about language and contests anew some of the old stereotypes about the nature of languages and speech communities.

And, I might add, the current increase in scholarly interest seems to be matched by an increase in the absolute numbers of speakers and users – a promising trend for what is still a relatively new language.

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