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Whatever happened to Esperanto?

The life of a constructed language



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Esperanto was created as a symbol of peace and understanding. Almost 140 years later, is there still a place for it in the modern world? By Sue Anderson



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Esperanto is an artificial, ‘constructed’ language created in the 1870s by Polish-Jewish ophthalmologist LL Zamenhof. Frustrated by distrust and misunderstanding between Russian-, Polish-, German- and Yiddish-speaking groups in his home city of Białystok, he set out to devise a unifying global language. The aim was to facilitate language learning and promote international understanding while – crucially – allowing speakers to retain their own native languages and cultural identities. Zamenhof originally called his creation Lingvo Internacia (International Language), but it soon became known as Esperanto, meaning ‘hopeful’.

In 1887, after a decade of development, Zamenhof published the *Unua Libro* (First Book) containing 920 root words, and the first Esperanto grammar guide, *Fundamenta Gramatiko*. Esperanto caught the popular imagination and took off very quickly, first in the Russian Empire and Central Europe, then spreading to the Americas, China and Japan. The movement soon adopted its own flag (*Verda Flago*) and anthem (*La Espero*). The first world congress of Esperanto speakers, held in Boulogne-sur-Mer (France) in 1905, attracted 688 participants. Congresses have been held almost every year ever since.

Despite the promising start, the ensuing history of Esperanto was

fraught with conflict. Esperantists themselves were divided on the purpose and design of the language from the outset; some even broke away to set up rival movements.

Esperantism was viewed with suspicion by both Tsarist Russia and Hitler’s Germany, and struggled against a background of anti-Jewish sentiment, pogroms and two world wars. Zamenhof himself died in 1917 at only 57, and did not live to see members of his own family

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killed by the Nazis. In later years, the fall of the Soviet Union weakened the movement, as did the global expansion of English language teaching.

Key features

The simplicity of Esperanto comes from two key features: 16 invariable grammar rules; and regular phonetic spelling. The Esperanto alphabet consists of 28 letters in Latin script (see box). Pronunciation follows the International Phonetic Alphabet and

is regular: there is only one sound for each letter and one letter for each sound. The emphasis in a word always falls on the second-to-last syllable. *ĵ* sounds like the ‘y’ in yellow or boy, and *ĉ* is a ‘ts’ sound, like the ‘zz’ in pizza. Of the accented letters, *ĉ* is pronounced like the English ‘ch’ in cheese, and *ŝ* like ‘sh’. *Ĝ* is the ‘g’ in gem, *ĵ* a voiced ‘zh’ sound, as in fusion, and *ĥ* is ‘ch’ as in German Bach or Scottish loch.

There is no indefinite article – only a definite article, *la*, which elides to *l’*. Nouns used as subjects end in *-o* (singular) or *-oj* (plural), eg *hundo* (dog), *hundoj* (dogs). Nouns in the accusative case end in *-n* (*hundon*). Adjectives modifying nouns end in *-a* (singular) or *-aj* (plural), eg *la bruna hundo* (the brown dog). Most adverbs end in *-e*. Verbs are not adjusted for person or number: ‘I sing’ is *mi kantas*; ‘you sing’ *vi kantas*; ‘they sing’ *ili kantas*. Verb endings change with tense or mood, eg *-is* (past), *-os* (future).

To streamline the vocabulary, Zamenhof adopted a system of root words plus affixes. Most of the original Esperanto roots are based on Latin, though some come from modern Romance languages as well as Polish, Russian, German and English. An agglutinative or ‘building block’ approach is used to combine roots with affixes to form new words, eg *lerni* = to learn, *lernejo* = a school, *lernanto* = a pupil/student, *lernejstro* = a headmaster. Many affixes can stand alone: *ejo* = place, *estro* = leader/head, etc. A common prefix is *mal-*, signifying an opposite, eg *malgranda* (small), derived from *granda* (large). Compound words are formed by juxtaposing words, sometimes with a vowel inserted to aid pronunciation. The main word comes at the end, eg *kantobirdo* (songbird), *birdokanto* (birdsong).

Word order in Esperanto is freer than in English, where an adjective must precede the noun it modifies; in Esperanto, it may precede or follow the noun. English standard word order is subject-verb-object, whereas Esperanto – theoretically, at least – allows any permutation. This is made easier because the word endings identify the parts of speech. For example, the three elements of *la knabo persekutis la katon* (the boy chased the cat) could be rearranged in any

order and still be understandable.

Easy to learn

The main claim made for Esperanto is that it is easy to learn. The principles can certainly be grasped within a few hours, although

some aspects are possibly a bit harder for native speakers of English. A second claim is that it is politically neutral and transcends nationalism, belonging to everyone and no one. Universal adoption of English (or other 'natural' languages) is unpopular in many countries. Because Esperanto is intended as a second language, it puts everyone on an equal footing. No one is forced to speak 'someone else's language'.

Esperantists also argue that universal Esperanto learning would eliminate the need for and cost of translation and interpretation – a prospect which possibly does not appeal to ITI members! Whether or not that is true, a proven benefit is the straightforward insight that Esperanto gives into language learning and the principles of grammar. Studies have shown that students who learn Esperanto as a second language learn a third more easily and quickly. The movement also has an international network called Pasporta Servo (Passport Service), a kind of Esperanto Airbnb that enables travellers to contact and stay (free) with fellow Esperantists in 90 countries.

Critics argue that Esperanto has simply had its day. Despite ongoing efforts to promote it, current use of the language remains limited. The general public tend to see it as a curiosity, and remain unconvinced of its benefits. As a potential lingua franca, it is dwarfed by English. Indeed, the *finna venko* or 'final victory' of Esperanto as a global language has been abandoned as a goal, in favour of celebration and preservation. Another common accusation is that it is inherently sexist, as the default form of nouns is masculine, with a derived form being used for the feminine, eg *patro* (father) and *patrino* (mother).



Esperanto may be easy, but is it too pared down, inflexible, unmusical? Esperantists counter that new roots are continually being added and speakers are actively

encouraged to devise new words themselves. An Esperanto Academy monitors current trends. Advocates claim that Esperanto can express fine shades of meaning and retains the capacity for creative expression – unlike other constructed languages such as Volapük, which it displaced.

Esperanto has a body of literature including both original works and translations, with many global classics now existing in Esperanto. The first translations of poetry and

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prose were done by Zamenhof himself as he developed the language and tested its capacity for expression. Science fiction and Esperanto seem to have had a natural affinity, with Jules Verne an early supporter. Scottish poet, author and translator William Auld (1924-2006) was the first person writing in Esperanto to be nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Auld's major work was the long poem *La infana raso* (The Infant Race), and his translations included Shakespeare, Tolkien and Burns. PEN International accepted an Esperanto affiliate group in 1993.

Esperanto has cropped up occasionally in popular culture – featuring, for example, in the TV sitcom *Red Dwarf* and in a Michael Jackson video. In the theatre, plays by Ionesco, Shakespeare and Alan Ayckbourn have been translated into and performed in Esperanto. In cinema, scenes from Chaplin's

The Great Dictator show posters in Esperanto (mistranslated, according to some). *Incubus*, a cult horror film from 1966 starring a pre-*Star Trek* William Shatner, is one of very few films to date shot entirely in Esperanto.

Around the world

Esperanto associations operate around the world, including here in *Britio*, where groups meet in cities including London, Cardiff, Southampton and Manchester. The Esperanto Association of Britain, based in Staffordshire, offers access to a library of over 13,000 books, and runs events and training courses. The 2017 British Esperanto Conference was held in Edinburgh; the 2018 edition is in Aberystwyth.

The Universal Esperanto Association, headquartered in the Netherlands, has members in 120 countries and estimates global speaker numbers at around two million. Esperanto is recognised by UNESCO, although no country has adopted Esperanto officially. Even so, there is a collective name (*Esperantujo*) for the diaspora of places where it is spoken. Cases of children learning only Esperanto from birth are rare, but one prominent native bilingual speaker is the billionaire philanthropist George Soros, who was taught by his Esperantist father. In 1936 the Jewish-Hungarian family changed their name from Schwartz to Soros, meaning 'will soar' in Esperanto.

The internet has given Esperanto something of a boost, bringing new online platforms and tools for speakers and learners. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have active Esperanto communities. Popular language website Duolingo now offers a course in Esperanto, claiming over a million students, while Esperantists have their own learning platform called Lernu! (Learn!). Google Translate added Esperanto in 2012, although Bing still 'recognises' it as Czech. The Esperanto version of Wikipedia has over 170,000 pages. YouTube is a good place to hear examples of the language spoken by enthusiastic young Esperantists. Esperanto is far from dead, but still looks set to fall short of the ambitious goals set by its founder over a century ago. 

Rough justice

Tony Parr tells the story of a curious court case from the Netherlands last year in which a translation company was sued for delivering poor quality



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Lawyers love telling scare stories: about how translators could be sued for huge sums of money if they deliver shoddy work – perhaps even if they make just a tiny but vital mistake; and of course about how important it is to have your own set of terms and conditions, plus good professional indemnity insurance to back you up in an emergency. Yeah, yeah, big deal. I mean, it's never going to happen, is it? Like, have you ever heard of a translator being taken to court?

I did some research a few years ago for a workshop I was running (here in the Netherlands) on certified translations. I got in touch with a lawyer from an insurance company, one of the very few to offer indemnity insurance policies for translators, and asked her how many court cases there had been in recent years involving translators' liability. 'None,' she instantly replied. She explained that, during the 10 to 15 years that she had been with the company, there had been just two insurance claims relating to translation errors. Both had been settled amicably, out of court.

Well, now it's happened. As far as I am aware, for the very first time, a dissatisfied customer has sued a translation company for delivering a poor-quality translation. The case, on which a Dutch court pronounced judgment just over a year ago,¹ involved a glossy coffee-table book called *Beautiful Holland*. It is a lavishly produced, hefty tome, consisting of 55,000 words and lots of large, full-colour photographs all about the geography, culture and history of

the Netherlands. The pages aren't numbered, but I would guess that there are about 250 of them. It's intended for businesses, expatriate workers and tourists, and includes two special features: a customised introduction enabling you to present the book as a personal gift to your customers, plus interactivity in the form of hidden content that can be revealed with the aid of a smartphone app. In short, it's pretty swish.

A translation company was hired to translate the book into eight languages: German, English, French, Italian, Spanish,

The extent of the claim was €1.2 million, representing the loss of income from 40,000 books that were not fit for sale, plus the cost of retranslating and reprinting the books

Portuguese, Chinese and Japanese. We're not talking about a fly-by-night one-man outfit here. Enschede-based Vertaalbureau Perfect is a large, reputable company with a staff of around 15. It is ISO-certified (both ISO-9001 and ISO-17100, and not just 'working to ISO standards'). The website looks slick and professional, and has a comforting personal touch, including a whopping great list of previous customers. They 'guarantee that you'll be happy with your translation. If you want us to make adjustments to it, we'll gladly do this in consultation with you.'²

They're members of various industry associations and were ranked 12th in 2014 in the Deloitte Technology Fast 50 Benelux, a listing of the fastest-growing tech companies in the Benelux. They're pleasant and competent people. I should know: I've worked for them on a number of occasions in the past.

What happened?

So what happened? The translations were produced and delivered between March and May 2015. The total cost was some €50,000 including VAT. On 18 May, the client (which was also called Beautiful Holland, as it happens) reported that there was a problem with the translations, and on 10 June it promised (in response to a request from Perfect) to be more specific. On 24 June, Perfect again inquired about the specific nature of the problem. In the meantime, large numbers of the book had been printed and the publicity machine was running on full steam. The official book launch took place on 6 July in a big hotel in The Hague, with the first copies being presented to Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the Chinese ambassador. On 16 July, the client notified Perfect that the Chinese edition was 'shockingly bad' and that they had also received complaints about the English edition. Perfect again asked for a detailed list of complaints. On 6 August, the Japanese embassy wrote to Beautiful Holland asking to be sent five copies of the English version as 'the Japanese version was a literal translation from the Dutch and hence incomprehensible'.

On 24 August, the client again wrote to Perfect, formally holding them liable for the poor translations, initially in Chinese and Japanese. The extent of the claim was €1.2 million, representing the loss of income from 40,000 books that were not fit for sale, plus the cost of retranslating and reprinting the books. In September, the client reported that a number of 'independent translators' had assessed the English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese and Japanese versions and found them all to be substandard.

Below standard

So just how bad were the translations? The Japanese embassy's request for English versions sounds pretty damning. As an English-speaking translator, I can only pass some sort of judgement on the English translation. This was found to be 'poor in quality' by another translation agency engaged by the client as an expert witness, while a professor of English from Nijmegen University expressed the view that 'the translation was far below the standard required for a book that is supposed to showcase the Netherlands'.

Basically, they're right. The English is very clunky, as Ros Schwartz would say. Culture-specific terms are not explained; there is an assumption that the reader is already familiar with the Dutch language and culture; many of the translations are far too literal; many sentences are long and complex, making the whole thing hard to read; and there are frequent low-level errors involving grammar, punctuation, phrasing and collocations. In short, it's clear that the translator hasn't stopped to think about what they are translating and for whom. The box opposite shows a handful of examples. Need I say more?

Armed with this background information, you might be forgiven

for thinking that the translation company didn't have a leg to stand on. In fact, it had not one, but two legs to stand on. Indeed, the court didn't even get around to weighing up the evidence about the substandard nature of the translation work. While it acknowledged that the translation company had clearly not delivered on its customer satisfaction guarantee, it found two reasons why it could not be held liable.

The court felt that it was the client's own fault for proceeding with the publication even after problems had been reported with the translation

Small print

Firstly, the client had failed to complain within 10 days. Although the client had not signed the translation company's terms and conditions (and may not even have seen them – the court commented that the small print could scarcely have been any smaller), as a business rather than a consumer, it should have been aware that they applied to the contract. It should therefore have

been aware of the need to report any complaints within 10 days.

Secondly, the translation company should have been given an opportunity to rectify the errors within a reasonable period of time. It also should have been presented with a clear and detailed list of complaints on which it could have acted. In the absence of sufficient time and clarity, the translation company could not be held liable. The court felt that it was the client's own fault for proceeding with the publication even after problems had been reported with the translation.

So the claim was thrown out, the client ordered to pay the legal fees, and the quality issue did not even enter the argument. The translation company was protected by the wording of its terms and conditions.

It all seems very harsh. After all, how on earth can a client be expected to judge the quality of eight different translations of a 55,000-word book within 10 days? And is it reasonable to require someone who is not a professional translator to produce a detailed list of translation errors? For the time being, the lawyers prevail and common sense is left open-mouthed. ©

¹ Judgment no. ECLI:NL:RBOVE:2016:3327 (Overijssel District Court, Zwolle, 24 August 2016).

² All the quotes in this article are my own translations.



Wide of the mark

Some examples of the English translation of *Beautiful Holland*:

- 'Breda is an Orange city. This town in the west of the province of North Brabant owes its nickname to its historic ties with the House of Nassau.'
- 'Even today, [Breda] still serves a clearly visible purpose to the Dutch armed forces.'
- 'Dutch people live with, of and because of water.'
- 'No one should have been surprised if not just the eastern part of Noord-Holland but the entire country was known as "Waterland".'
- 'After that disaster, the Delta Works project was developed.'
- 'Around 1490, he begins signing his work with "Jheronimus Bosch".'
- 'With so much room for pioneering, life in Zeeland is never the same either.'