
The Contribution of the International Language Esperanto towards Linguistic Diversity

1. The Basics of the International Language Esperanto
 2. How Esperanto Supports Linguistic Diversity
 3. Some Specifics
 4. Proposals for Action
 5. Conclusions
-

1. The Basics of the International Language Esperanto

- 1.1. It is a neutral, international language, in use for more than 110 years now. It was proposed by Dr Zamenhof under the name *Lingvo Internacia*, through a brochure published in Warsaw in 1887. *Esperanto* is the pseudonym used by the author.
- 1.2. It has been in international use since 1905, when the first congress was held in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, with 688 participants from 20 countries.
- 1.3. Today, it is a living language with 40,000 and 150,000 speakers, according to the best estimates available; no precise number can be given since there has been no census. It is worth emphasizing that 80% of the world's languages have less than 100,000 speakers. In sum, Esperanto is an entirely normal language.¹

2. How Esperanto Supports Linguistic Diversity

2.1. Under current conditions:

By **spreading awareness of various languages and cultures**, especially minority ones (in congresses, through the internet or email, in exhibitions and festivals of languages, at the organizational level as well as individually).²

¹ The most important association has a total of 18,000 members in 111 countries. There are more members in Europe, but the language is sufficiently widespread in China, Japan, Iran, Madagascar and Cuba. There are about 200 families in which Esperanto is used as one of the home languages. It is taught in about 150 universities and colleges as well as 600 primary and high schools. More than 200 books are published every year. In all, more than 30,000 books have so far been published, more than half of which are translations. More than 250 periodicals exist, apart from videos, music CDs, regular radio, and where possible, TV broadcasts. It is used every day, especially, in the internet, where there are 2000 websites and more than 150,000 web pages in Esperanto. Besides there are chat-rooms and emails in Esperanto, and the language is used every day in meetings and Congresses. Between March and December 2004, for example, there were more than 100 meetings (all lasting more than a day) in Esperanto in 34 countries. Between 1000 and 4000 people come to the annual World Congresses; 5496 people from 72 countries came to the 72nd Congress in Warsaw in 1987. See: www.lingvo.org/ghisdate

2.1.1. By the **practice of linguistic diversity**: all speakers of the international language are at least bilingual. They are often trilingual or more, and they show great interest in languages, generally.

2.1.2. By highlighting the **equal rights of languages** on the basis of neutral communication, doing away with the imposition or dominance of any ethnic language. This idea can be found right from the beginning, in the writings of Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof [Ludoviko Lazaro Zamenhof] (1887, 1900, 1905...), in the World Congresses, etc.

2.2. Under optimum conditions of general usage in international relations, a neutral language would favour linguistic diversity in the larger frame of an ecology of languages. Linguistic diversity today will have a chance only if it can be made compatible with the needs of worldwide communication. If this tension is not resolved, only two extremes remain: either each language is isolated from all others, or authentic (rather than objectified-for-tourists) diversity disappears.

An international, neutral language can optimally unite these two dimensions. Because:

2.2.1. It favours an **equilibrium** between languages, and cultural **reciprocity**.

When a neutral, international language is generally learnt, English-language speakers too will need to learn it. This would place everyone in a more equitable relationship, and would facilitate a reciprocal and multidirectional cultural exchange.³ Monolingualism -- which closes the mind to diversity -- would diminish.

The costs of the current inequalities attributable to the hegemony of English have been spelt out, in the sphere of teaching, by François Grin,

² In January 2003, the European Commission accepted a proposal to organize language festivals. The project was proposed by the Association for European Awareness together with the World Esperanto Association, whose headquarters is in Rotterdam.

³ One example of the relatively equitable diversity which Esperanto promotes can be seen in the number of translations from various languages: the catalogue of the World Esperanto Association (UEA) for 2001 presents at least 66 anthologies from more than 30 literatures. Professor Pierre Janton of Clermont Ferrand University calls these productions, which now cover over 10,000 works from more than 35 countries, "the largest anthology from world culture ever embarked upon for the general public" (*L'espéranto*, "Que sais-je?", 1511, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1997). The *Index Translationum* (Index of Translations) of UNESCO presents for 1957-66, 70 percent of translations from just 4 languages: English, Russian, French and German. In the same period in Esperanto, 344 translations were published, 50 percent of which were from Chinese (103), Vietnamese (33), Dutch (23) and Japanese (22), and the rest from many other languages. Between 1991 and 2003, of the 1000 or so translations published in Esperanto, only 30 percent were from the 4 languages which corner the general market: English, French, German and Russian; about 5 percent each were from languages like Yiddish, Portuguese, Polish, Chinese, Japanese and Hungarian. In all, the distribution reflects more faithfully the language reality of the world, and presents exactly the inverse proportion for the 4 big languages: 30 percent of these languages in the Esperanto market, in contrast to 70 percent or more in the general market, coming from English, French, German and Russian, with increasing domination by English.

professor of economics at the University of Geneva. For example, every year, USA saves 16 billion dollars, because its expenditure on the teaching of other languages is only symbolic. This figure represents between 1/3 and 1/2 of its budget for research and education, the basis for scientific, technological and military development, to which other countries learning or practising English contribute indirectly.⁴ This is quite apart from the enormous income from the direct sale of cultural wares, the language-learning courses that foreigners take, etc. The one-sided disequilibrium is colossal, with its concomitant damage to diversity.

A redistribution of the expenditure meant for the teaching and practice of various languages would lead to a more proportionate and comparable enrichment, in tune with local initiatives, without setting up insuperable inequalities from the very start. For example, in the European Union, one could promote exchanges for the learning of a neutral interlanguage in **every** EU country, together with a programmatic learning of the basics of the respective languages. This would diversify the choice available, and increase sales, throughout the region, of textbooks, summer internships, periodicals with a wide circulation, etc. And this would awaken an interest later in travel, university education, research or work in different countries, with the certainty that one would enjoy the necessary mutual comprehension. In this kind of situation, diversity and a more equal relationship would both get a boost forward.⁵

2.2.2. An international, neutral language makes possible a significant saving in time, which one can spend on the learning of other languages, either through formal instruction or by oneself.

Esperanto is a fully functional language, but noticeably easier to learn than any ethnic language. For it consists of international lexemes and elements that are very widespread, which enable a free combination in tune with linguistic universals and with Jean Piaget's universal principle of generalizing assimilation.

That Esperanto is, in fact, easier to learn has been demonstrated by empirical experiments throughout its history, from those in the 1920s (for example, those reported to the League of Nations) up to today. Depending on the original language and its variants, the spectrum ranges from 2.1 to 7.4. On an average, one year of Esperanto learning is equal to 4 years of any other (ethnic) language.⁶ One can in fact spend the time saved in learning

⁴ François Grin. 2003. "Language Planning and Economics" In: *Current Issues in Language Planning*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2003. See www.etes.ucl.ac.be/Francqui/Grin-Francqui.pdf (consulted in May 2004).

⁵ Obviously, it is necessary to fix limits on the use of the neutral, international language. For example, during university studies in another country, after three or four months, one should be sufficiently proficient, at least passively, in the local language, so that one can follow lessons in this language, while at the same time reserving the right to express oneself and write assignments and examinations in the link language. Or, if one moves on account of work or emigrates, it should be necessary to achieve at least a passive competence in the local language after 3 or 6 months. These are possible directions along which one would need to analyze every situation concretely.

⁶ For the reports to the League of Nations, see *Esperanto in Perspective* pp. 748-760. Also see Edward Symoens, *Al nova lingvopolitiko: La propedeutika valoro de Esperanto*. UEA, Esperanto-Dokumento 28-29E, Rotterdam 1992 (especially, p. 21).

other languages and cultures, including English, and of course one's own or neighbouring languages, which will help to cultivate and strengthen linguistic diversity.

2.2.3. It implies a valorization in practice of language equality and diversity.

The feeling of linguistic equality and mutual respect spreads if the learning of an international, neutral language becomes standard practice. What gets discouraged is the idea that a historical or social group that wishes to conserve its coherence and autochthonous means of communication might have to face language loss or language domain curtailment due to the dominance of a foreign language.

This concept of language equality has informed the international language Esperanto ever since it was launched.

Using a neutral language for international contact would favour a general increase in prestige (externally) and self respect (internally) of speakers of various languages, no matter how small these languages are. This is an essential condition for language conservation, and thus, linguistic diversity, as Mühlhäusler (1996/2002), David Crystal (2000), Akira Yamamoto (1998), Lynn Landweer (1998), Carme Junyent (1998) and others have explicitly argued.⁷

One may call this perspective *Integrative Ecology of Languages*, since it gives equal and interdependent importance to global communication, and to local and national communication. If one were to forget either of the two dimensions or poles, interlingual contact, which has always been an enriching experience, and has become indispensable in our times, would become unbalanced and those less powerful would suffer the consequences.

Thus, an international neutral language is the keystone for integrative ecolinguistic equilibrium.

3. A FEW SPECIFICS

There is erroneous information in the specialist literature that needs to be corrected. Let me put this information into two groups.

3.1. Esperanto *does not* aim to be the only language

⁷ Crystal, David. 2000. *Language Death*. Cambridge University Press, p. 127-144; Mühlhäusler, Peter (1996 / 2002). *Linguistic Ecology. Language Change and Linguistic Imperialism in the Pacific Region*. Routledge, New York, 2002, p. 322-324; Yamamoto, Akira Y. 1998. "Retrospect and prospect on new emerging language communities". In Ostler, Nicholas (ed.), *Endangered languages: what role for the specialist?* Bath: Foundation for Endangered Languages, p. 114; Landweer, M. Lynn. 1998. "Indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality: case study of two languages — Labu and Vanino". In Ostler (ed.), 64-72, op. cit.; Junyent, Carme. 1998. *Contra la planificació. Una perspectiva ecolingüística*, Empúries, Barcelona, p. 180, and generally the entire last chapter: "Basis for ecolinguistic planning".

- 3.1.1. This is clearly defined in the fundamental Declaration of Esperanto in 1905, unanimously approved during the Congress in Boulogne-sur-Mer, based on Dr Zamenhof's words. This Declaration, still valid, says that the aim is “to disseminate throughout the world, the use of a neutral human language” [...] “which does not force itself into the internal lives of peoples, and which does not at all aim to push out existing national languages.”⁸
- 3.1.2. For its part, UNESCO, in a Resolution (paragraphs 4221 and 4222) of its General Conference in Montevideo (Uruguay) in 1954, acknowledges that the results attained by Esperanto in bringing the peoples of the world closer, is in consonance with the aims and ideals of UNESCO. Among those aims is “stimulating the fertile diversity of cultures”, as the current General Director, Koïchiro Matsuura, reminded us during the inaugural session of the Barcelona Forum. The Resolution of 1954 was confirmed by a new Resolution of the General Conference in Sofia (Bulgaria) in 1985, which fleshed out the Resolution with several recommendations to member-states, one of which was to study the theme of language and examine the introduction of Esperanto in schools and in institutions of higher learning.

3.2. Esperanto *has not* failed

- 3.2.1. Because it became a *living language*. Among the hundreds of projects and experiments for an international language, only Esperanto has succeeded in becoming a living language in full measure, internationally used for four generations now, with a rich cultural tradition, both original and in translation, and which has spread to every continent. This is, in fact, an unprecedented success in the cultural history of the world.
- 3.2.2. As far as the goal of becoming a widely used international language is concerned, here too one cannot seriously claim that the Esperanto project has failed.
- 3.2.2.1. First of all, Zamenhof set up this goal realistically, without a fixed deadline. Writing in 1900, he put it like this: “it may well be that it will come about after a year, ten years, a hundred years, or even after several hundreds of years”, and also that perhaps the idea would hibernate “for entire decades”.
- 3.2.2.2. On the other hand, if it is desirable to have a balanced coexistence amongst languages, an equilibrium based on a neutral,

⁸ See, also, the several themes of the Esperanto World Congresses: Mainz (1958): *Reciprocal appreciation of cultural values*; Madrid (1968): *Cultural rights and linguistic discrimination*; Portland (1972): *World tourism and linguistic diversity: value of foreign-language teaching in schools*; Belgrade (1973): *Language equality in theory and practice*; Stockholm (1980): *Discrimination (racial, economic, against women or sexual orientation, religious, linguistic)*; Havana (1990): *Esperanto, evolution and cultural diversity*; Montpellier (1998): *The Mediterranean: a bridge between cultures*; Beijing (2004, 24-31 July): *Language equality in international relations*. Also noteworthy is the *Prague Manifesto*, launched during the Congress in that city in 1996, especially its sixth point “for linguistic diversity”.

international language, what sense does it make to say that the project has failed? Of something desirable and positive for humanity, one does not say that it has failed, but that one has *still not achieved it*, and that therefore it is necessary to work towards it. For example, if one believes it positive and desirable, one does not assert that “equality between men and women has failed” (since in many countries the discrimination is quite real), or that “peace has failed” (since war continues in many countries). One may say the same about literacy, racism, etc.

3.2.2.3. Apart from the favourable opinions expressed earlier by renowned linguists (Max Müller, Antoine Meillet, Edward Sapir, Mario Pei...), more recent authors too have taken a positive view on the prospects for an international language – authors such as André Martinet (A Practical School for Higher Studies, France; former member of the association IALA), 1991, Umberto Eco (writer and semiologist), 1993/1996, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, Robert Phillipson, 2003.⁹

Likewise, it is a mistake to claim that English fulfills the functions that Esperanto was designed for (and therefore that Esperanto has failed with the rise of English). The impressive spread of English in the last decades is, among other things, clear proof that a language for international communication is needed.

But the question of how to develop an integrative ecology of languages that sustains linguistic diversity is not solved by English, even a basic level of English. This is because, in one form or another, it is not neutral when native speakers intervene, nor reciprocal, and it is not possible to master it without unbalanced investments in economics, time and identity.¹⁰

4. ACTION PROPOSALS

4.1. It is essential to raise the **prestige** of the international language together with the value of all languages. That is, one must raise the level of awareness

⁹Martinet, André. 1991. “Sur quelques questions d’interlinguistique. Une interview de François Lo Jacomo et Detlev Blanke”. In: *Zeitschrift für Phonetik. Sprachwissenschaft und Kommunikationsforschung*, 44, p. 675-687; Eco, Umberto. 1993. *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea* [Esperanto translation 1996: *La serchado de la perfekta lingvo*; English translation 1995; German translation 1994; Spanish translation 1994, and others], in chapter 16: “The International Auxillary Languages”; interview with Paul Amar, TV Channel *Paris-Première*, 1996.02.27, mentioned in Cherpillod, André. 2003. *Une langue pour l’Europe? Mais oui! Pour sauver les langues de l’Europe*, La Blanchetière, Courgenard, p. 57; Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. 2000. *Linguistic genocide in education — or worldwide diversity and human rights?*, Lawrence Erlbaum Ass., Mahwah-New Jersey-London, p. 280-284; Phillipson, Robert. 2003. *English-Only Europe? Challenging Language Policy*, Routledge, London-New York, p. 171-174 [Esperanto translation 2004: *Chu nur-angla Europo? Defio al lingva politiko*].

¹⁰ The examples based on Denmark, Norway or Sweden are not representative of the discriminatory and assimilative potential of English, if it were to become a generally used language, because, for one thing, these are independent states whose languages, being Germanic, are close to English, and for another, these countries do not have an already asymmetrical bilingual situation, and are, in this respect, quite different from, say, Catalan-speaking territories.

about the need for an international language in order that all languages be equally valued. The basis for any social change is sensitization and dissemination of ideas before any concrete measures are taken. There are many ways to raise this prestige: research, public or private investments (as a nod to the market picture: only what is seen as modern and contemporary tends to be liked), considering that the cost of loss of linguistic diversity is much greater than the cost of investment supporting many languages and simultaneously a neutral international tool for communication. The social (and thus, the economic) consequences that follow when there is loss of diversity have been clearly enumerated by David Crystal (*Language Death*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 32-67), and others. Some documents of the European Union have also discussed this matter.

4.2. **Interdisciplinary studies** on language communication at the world and continental levels are needed (from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, mass-media, economics, language policy, law, philosophy, anthropology, history, pedagogy, information sciences...). Professor Robert Phillipson notes that, at least in Europe, nothing has been done in the field of language policy in a multidisciplinary framework. This is a theoretical aspect that one tends to forget even though it plays a key role in making coexistence viable and sustainable.¹¹

4.3. To implement coordinated **experimental use** of the international language in the context, for example, of doing a serious statistical evaluation of the “propedeutic” value of Esperanto in teaching, i.e., its value (thanks to its regularity) as an optimal preparatory base for the learning of other languages, as was demonstrated in the controlled experiments at the University of Paderborn (Germany). Another proposal is to teach Esperanto in the European Union on an international, experimental basis in selected schools in the framework of an intergovernmental agreement, signed by at least three countries, preferably with shared borders. Later one could organize exchanges, meetings, etc., which would help address the questions of unity and diversity as presented in point 2.2.1(c). Similar experiments have already been performed, although on a smaller scale and without intergovernmental agreements.¹²

5. CONCLUSIONS

¹¹ In M. Kontra, R. Phillipson, T. Skutnabb-Kangas, T. Várady (eds). 1999. *Language: a Right and a Resource*, Budapest: Central European University Press.

¹² Frank, Helmar, B. Frank-Böhringer, Yashovardhan (Ed.). 1982. *Lingvo-kibernetiko / Sprachkybernetik*, Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen; Frank, Helmar. 1983. “Europäische Sprachpolitik. Aufgabe, Lösungsangebote und Schwierigkeiten”. In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Beilage zur Wochenzeitung “Das Parlament”*, B 11/83, of 26-03-1983, p. 26-38; Corsetti, Renato/La Torre, Mauro. 1995. “Quale lingua prima? Per un esperimento CEE che utilizzi l’esperanto”, In: *Language Problems & Language Planning* (Amsterdam: CED/Benjamins) 19, no. 1, p. 26-46. The research to date in this field was mainly done in the second half of the 1970s, up to the 1990s. Summing up, one may say that 2 years of ILo (Internacia Lingvo Esperanto), followed by 5 years of English is equal to more than 7 years of English language teaching. With the same investment in time, one attains a greater proficiency in English plus a knowledge of the inter-language Esperanto, enough for normal communication. Some 70-80 percent of the learners achieved this. The ideal situation is that the ILo be taught by the teachers themselves (of English, or another foreign language). See www.vanoostendorp.nl/interlinguistiek/neighbour/indexso.htm for information on the background for this project, called NEIGHBOUR.

5.1. An international neutral language is necessary for ecological equilibrium between languages, with the aim of preserving linguistic diversity in a world characterized by worldwide communication and exchanges.

5.2. This perspective may be called *integrative ecology of languages*. An international, neutral language is a decisive element, a keystone for integrative, ecolinguistic equilibrium.¹³

¹³ Other works consulted: Bastardas, Albert. 1996. *Ecologia de les llengües. Medi, contacte i dinàmica sociolingüística*, Ed. Proa, Barcelona; Fettes, Mark/Bolduc, Suzanne. 1998. *Al lingva demokratio. Towards Linguistic Democracy. Vers la démocratie linguistique*. Universala Esperanto-Asocio, Rotterdam; Phillipson, Robert. 2003. *Linguistic Imperialism*, (6th edition/ 1st ed. 1992); Piron, Claude. 1994. *Le défi des langues. Du gâchis au bon sens*, L'Harmattan, Paris; Solé i Camardons, Jordi. 1998. *Poliglotisme i raó. El discurs ecodiomàtic de Delfi Dalmau*, Pagès Editors, Lleida; Wolton, Dominique. 2000. *Internet i després...? Una teoria crítica sobre els nous "media"*, ECSA, Barcelona [French original, 1999, Flammarion, Paris], especially, chapter 5: "The European Desert"; *Declaració universal de drets lingüístics [Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights]*, Barcelona, 1996, especially "Preliminaries".