

Communism in words



A brief history of Esperanto, the language intimately tied to the common destiny of the working class.

My dad's love of foreign languages began when he gave up bus-conducting and crossed the Channel to fight Franco and become a communist. In Catalonia, a fighter told him that if the International Brigadiers had known Esperanto, they might have had more success. When someone at a party school called Esperanto petty-bourgeois — then the line — he was shocked and disappointed. He told me later, "He's wrong; it's a good idea. It's communism in words. One day, everyone will speak it."

I loved this idea of a universal language. Its inventor designed it to be simple, and I learned it in just three months. In 2011, the Catalan Esperanto Association invited me to give a eulogy commemorating the International Brigadiers at their memorial in Montjuïc Cemetery. They wanted it in the form of a tribute to my father, so I gave it in Esperanto.

In the early twentieth century, revolutionaries embraced this language, seeing it as a tool to build international solidarity. Esperanto faded along with many of those hopes as it faced decades of attacks from fascist and Communist states alike, but its legacy is worth preserving.

Leizer Ludwik Zamenhof (1859–1917) created Esperanto to be a global second language. A Lithuanian Jew, Zamenhof grew up under Russian occupation and amid the tensions between Jews, Catholic Poles, Orthodox Russians, and Protestant Germans. He identified miscommunication as the main cause of this trouble.

First, Zamenhof tried to create a standardized Yiddish to unify Jews across the Russian Empire. In the end, he abandoned it in favor of a universal language, whose name means "the hoping one."

Underlying this project was Zamenhof's interna ideo, the belief that the language did not represent an end in itself but a step toward world peace and understanding.

He published his *Fundamento de Esperanto* in 1905, striving to maximize simplicity, efficiency, and elegance. The grammar has just sixteen rules, the spelling is phonetic, the nouns are genderless, and the verbs are regular and uninflected. He tested and expanded it by translating the Bible, Shakespeare, Moliere, and Goethe.

Esperanto shares some features with Yiddish and Ladino, Jewish lingua francas that had once helped erase borders. Some studies identify a Yiddish influence, though Zamenhof never mentioned one.

Esperanto's vocabulary poses a problem for twenty-first century internationalists, because it comes solely from European languages. Aficionados have invented other constructed languages (conlangs), like Lingwa de Planeta, that include non-European words, but Esperanto continues to dominate the field.

Other conlangs like Ido, Interlingue, and Interlingua have remained tiny but resilient, but only Esperanto has truly stood the test of time. Today, just under one million people know a little of the language, and ten million have studied it. It has a stable but de-territorialized speech community.

The League of Nations supported the idea of an auxiliary language, and in 1954 UNESCO gave the *Universala Esperanto-Asocio* (UEA) "consultative status." Various Protestant and Catholic denominations have tolerated the use of Esperanto as a liturgical language. The founder of the Baha'i Faith supported the idea of a conlang; some of its followers favor Esperanto while others prefer Interlingua.

Critics call Esperanto artificial and acultural. But the distinction between natural and artificial is hard to maintain in the case of languages. Pidgins are also "artificial," arising at an identifiable time and place, but many evolve into creoles, indisputably natural languages. Many states standardize and legislate their official languages. Language reformers invented much of the phonology, morphology, grammar, and vocabulary of modern Chinese. And writers often shape and reshape their mother tongues, as a glance at Shakespeare's neologisms — foul-mouthed, swagger, bedazzle — demonstrates. If words adjudged possible can become actual words, possible languages can become actual languages.

Further, Esperanto does not lack culture. Some two thousand *denaskuloj*, or native speakers, have been raised in it, thus creolizing it. More than one hundred periodicals appear in it, and there are thirty thousand Esperanto books and several full-length feature films.

Zamenhof designed Esperanto as a second language to supplement, rather than supplant, ethnic languages. Today, the UEA has more than 15,000 members in 121 countries and holds annual world congresses. Attendance has remained fairly constant in recent years — 1,252 attended the Slovakian congress in 2016, 2,698 that in France the previous year. However, its individual membership is falling.

Esperanto and Revolution

Given its internationalism and pacifism, Esperanto attracted anarchists, socialists, and communists. Fascist regimes recognized its revolutionary potential and suppressed it.

In World War I, the UEA declared its neutrality, and the pro-war press reviled Esperantists as national traitors. Some eventually compromised with nationalism.

In 1921, red and worker Esperantists founded the *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda* (SAT, the World Anational Association), dedicated to the international class struggle. We should recognize this as the

first red-green party, as green is Esperanto's color. The SAT admitted delegates from all left-wing parties and broke with the UEA, accusing it of capitulating to capitalism and betraying internationalism.

In its early years, the SAT was closely linked to the Soviet Esperanto Union (SEU). While some Soviet Esperantists wanted their organizations to welcome revolutionaries across the world, loyalty to Moscow became its hallmark.

The SAT's idea of nationlessness appealed to some Soviet Esperantists, and the two groups collaborated. Eventually, however, the Soviets became critical of SAT communists for cooperating with other parties. In the late 1920s, the SAT's members outside Russia broke away to form the Internacio de Proletaj Esperantistoj (International of Proletarian Esperantists), which followed the Moscow line. Marxist opposition to the idea of nationlessness and the SAT's increasingly anti-Soviet line contributed to the split.

Anarchist Esperantists and others preached anationalism in Spain's Civil War. During World War II, the SAT faced intense repression in continental Europe and, since 1945, has devoted itself mainly to publishing. Although it wanted to integrate Esperanto into social movements, the SAT's greatest postwar achievement came with the magnificent monolingual Plena Ilustrita Vortaro (Complete Illustrated Dictionary, 1970), which set a new standard for the language.

Dictators of all kinds have tried to exterminate Esperanto, which Ulrich Lins called *la danĝera lingvo* ("the dangerous language"). Of course, states try to stamp out many languages, such as those spoken by despised minorities or rebel groups. Esperanto is particularly vulnerable to these attacks because it has never commanded a social base and its speakers are widely scattered.

Hitler saw Esperantists as enemies of the state not only because of their pacifism and leftism but also because of their Jewish founder. In *Mein Kampf*, he condemned Esperanto as "a secret language," portraying it as a Jewish weapon.

Two years after Hitler seized power, the journal *Der deutsche Esperantist* stopped appearing. Martin Bormann attacked Esperanto as a *Mischsprache* — a mongrel language. Heinrich Himmler disbanded its clubs, and Reinhard Heydrich began annihilating it. A pro-Nazi Esperanto organization briefly appeared, but the Nazis eventually suppressed that as well.

A few Esperantists joined the resistance, while others continued to meet secretly. Many died in concentration camps, where some continued to teach the language; others committed suicide. When Hitler's troops marched east, they shot Zamenhof's son; his daughters died in the camps.

Other fascist leaders followed Hitler's suit. Portugal and Spain banned Esperanto as a threat to language purity. In Italy, it survived until 1941, when Radio Rome ended its Esperanto broadcasts.

The Soviet Union violently suppressed Esperanto after years of tolerance and even encouragement. Most Soviet Esperantists welcomed the 1917 revolution and rebranded their language as the language of the international proletariat.

Some Esperantists allied with the Movement for a Proletarian Culture (*Proletkult*), arguing that a new culture demanded a new language. For a brief moment, it looked like Esperanto would be taught in schools and factories — the long-awaited breakthrough seemed imminent. But, in 1921, when the Communist International set up a commission to investigate an international auxiliary language, it came out against Esperanto in favor of Ido.

Despite this, Esperanto continued to grow. The Soviet Union broadcast in the language and issued propagandistic postage stamps for it.

However, the language didn't fit into the transition from internationalism to "socialism in one country." The SEU was closed down, and, in 1937–38, during the Great Terror, some of its members were imprisoned or executed because of the paranoid idea that the organization had become vulnerable to manipulation by "foreign spies," Zionists, and Trotskyists. After World War II, Esperantists in Eastern Europe faced similar repression.

In the 1950s, survivors in Soviet-bloc countries denounced the Esperanto ban. After Stalin's death, a controlled revival followed, and Esperantists skillfully utilized Moscow's growing peace movement. They restored links to the UEA, and state subsidies began trickling in. Today Esperanto has a bigger following in Russia and Eastern Europe than in most other places.

Chinese anarchists embraced Esperanto as an auxiliary language in response to a broader campaign by other activists to make literary Chinese easier to understand. Some Chinese Esperantists in Tokyo and Paris believed such a move would open China to the world while preserving its "cultural essence." Others, more extreme, proposed abolishing the Chinese language altogether and replacing it with Esperanto.

While the Esperanto craze among Chinese overseas died down, supporters at home won over leading intellectuals, including Lu Xun. For them, Esperanto would build internationalism and bring enlightenment to citizens kept illiterate by the complexity of Chinese writing. Esperantists also participated in the movement that campaigned to latinize written Chinese.

Communists in China also learned Esperanto, and used it after the Japanese invasion to seek out foreign support for the resistance. The Japanese female Esperantist Hasegawa Teru — also known as Verda Majo or Green May — went to China and joined the Klara Circle, named to honor both Zamenhof's wife Klara and Marxist theorist Clara Zetkin. Hasegawa tried to interest Chinese women in proletarian Esperantist writing and urged her comrades in Japan to call for a world boycott of their country.

The new Communist government in Beijing rewarded the Esperantists for their role in language reform by letting them teach their language in state schools. As in the Soviet Union, this government support didn't last long. In the early 1950s, the Esperantists were suppressed, but they were later allowed back. They suffered again in the Cultural Revolution, like many Chinese people with foreign contacts.

In general, however, the Cultural Revolution promoted Esperanto. Radio broadcasts in the language increased, and the monthly magazine *El Popola Ĉinio* (People's China) and other Esperantist literature flourished. Courses were held to teach the language and train cadres to work in the radio station and publishing.

At one point, Beijing's Esperanto Association counted up to four hundred thousand speakers, and even today students can study Esperanto in some universities. After China's opening to the world in the 1980s, however, numbers fell as other languages became available. Nevertheless, Chinese radio stations continue to broadcast in Esperanto.

Bridge of words

Does Esperantism have a future, or is it too quixotic and utopian to survive? The decline of the labor movement in the West and the collapse of communism in the East removed its traditional supports. Is

its best hope to survive as, in the words of linguist Ross Perlin, “a cheerful diaspora that lives on at characterful classes and congresses where diehards for the interna ideo mingle with fearsome polyglots and hardcore language nerds”?

Esperanto peaked in the early twentieth century, when global French was declining and English had not yet become truly global. English, now the world’s primary language, faces rising juggernauts like Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic. If English is knocked from its ascendancy, it might be by a Babel of competing mega-languages, allowing smaller languages — including Esperanto — to survive in the interstices.

Some linguists see the internet as the potential savior for languages endangered by these global killers, while others believe these languages need real-world analogs to survive. For Esperantists, a digital revival would align with the language’s history.

Esperanto developed not through a physical collective but in non-territorial communities linked by letters, phone calls, and occasional meetings. Today, the internet is connecting new Esperantists through forums, social media, WhatsApp groups, and online dictionaries. This community attracts young people, at home in the digital world.

In the transnational and wired world, Esperanto is bouncing back. Younger speakers are abandoning the language’s narrow, inward-looking model and updating how it is learned and used. With their youthful creativity, they are reaching out.

E@I, a loosely organized youth collective, uses technology to provide free, instant access to Esperanto. Where once you had to go out of their way to meet other speakers, now they are a mouse click away.

Several hundred blogs promote Esperantist books, games, music, and humor. The language’s Wikipedia already exceeds 215,000 pages. More than 100,000 learners use lernu!, the free multilingual Esperanto website set up by E@I, and 750,000 use Duolingo. Today, more people are learning Esperanto than ever before.

This second Esperanto wave does not compete with the first. The traditional wing embraces the virtual wing, and digital Esperantists rely on the manuals, dictionaries, and literature created in the analog age. In the past, supporters promoted Esperanto’s logicity and predictability; these attributes suit the computer age.

Zamenhof thought Esperanto could “remove the walls between ethnicities and accustom people to seeing their neighbors as brothers and sisters.” These values — humanitarianism, internationalism, socialism — are needed more than ever today.

He likened the language, in a metaphor recalled by Esther Schor in her *Bridge of Words*, to a plank lying on a riverbank that at some future point people might use to build a bridge. While no big bridge is currently on the horizon, there seems to be no end to Zamenhof’s “sacred dream” of one.

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