

57 Should a planned language such as Esperanto be promoted as an international lingua franca?

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The sociolinguistic status of the international language Esperanto suggests that a planned language can be an effective means of communication just like any ethnic (or “natural”) language. Despite its 130-year history, Esperanto is not the subject of serious linguistic research to the degree enjoyed by other languages, and its acquisition is not fostered with the same intensity.

What does research tell us?

According to *Ethnologue*, a frequently used reference on living languages, Esperanto is the second language of 2 million people (see also Wandel 2015); other estimates propose a number of 100,000 fluent speakers only. Since May 2015, more than 1.6 million people have started learning the language on the Internet platform Duolingo. Experience indicates that due to the transparency of its morphosyntactic structure Esperanto is much easier to learn than other foreign languages (see, for example, Piron 2006: 2489), although this claim is difficult to substantiate in controlled studies.

We have studied the use of Esperanto as a lingua franca in cases of long-term and medium-term mobility (with a focus on Esperanto-speaking families) as well as its use as a corporate language in an international NGO in Slovakia (see Fiedler & Brosch 2018). Our findings suggest that the planned language can function as an efficient and expressive means of cross-cultural communication, allowing high degrees of inclusion. The participants in our NGO study (mainly interns and volunteers working for the European Voluntary Service) confirmed the ease of learning the language in a relatively short time.

While some of the volunteers working in the NGO knew Esperanto prior to their 6- or 12-month internships, others began learning it only after their decision to work there.

Another interesting result was that the professional setting of the NGO, which included employees and interns with six different mother tongues, was characterised by multilingual practices that changed according to the communicative situation and participants: Esperanto was used in about 80% of all interactions at work and also in personal communication during lunch breaks, while in the remaining time the local language, Slovak, and English as a lingua franca were used. In addition, our interviews found that a number of speakers reported experiencing for themselves the propaedeutic effect of Esperanto, i.e. their successful acquisition of Esperanto helped them learn further foreign languages. These findings show that the adoption of a planned language does not necessarily mean a devaluation of other languages.

Illustration and evidence

Knowledge of the planned language facilitated subsequent acquisition of other languages, including learning the local language after settling in a new host country with an Esperanto-speaking family:

“Esperanto has helped a lot to stimulate my ability to speak [...] on the whole, I would not even have tried to learn Hungarian if I had not had an Esperanto textbook for learning Hungarian, which made it easier for me.”

Esperanto has proven to be a living language with great potential as an effective means of communication in various domains. It is used in everyday conversation, as a language for special purposes, and as a medium for original and translated literature. It is the most successful of more than 1,000 constructed-language projects. This is partly due to its structural properties: a productive word-formation system and flexible syntax and reduction of complexity and exceptions, all without loss of expressiveness. But Esperanto's success is above all due to extralinguistic factors: the language has found a speech community that is sufficiently diverse and creative to guarantee its development and sustained dissemination. In April 2012 Esperanto was added to the languages in Google Translate, and development of Vikipedio (the Esperanto-language Wikipedia) is ongoing, with over 240,000 articles as of December 2017. The few native speakers of Esperanto (about 1,000 people) do not impose linguistic norms, meaning all speakers can communicate on an equal footing.

For these reasons, education systems should not ignore Esperanto, but should instead reconsider its potential as a language for communication of worth equal to that of natural languages. Efforts might be made to provide education in the planned language alongside other foreign language instruction.

Policy implications

1. Planned languages and interlinguistics (the study of planned languages) should be established as fields of teaching and research at universities.
2. Professional teaching materials for teaching Esperanto in schools should be created.
3. Esperanto should be offered as a foreign language in selected schools across Europe, as part of a coordinated approach to ascertain its value over the long term on a large scale. This would require teacher-training courses for each participating school with standards that guarantee high-quality teaching, as with other foreign languages.
4. All measures for the promotion of Esperanto should be accompanied by large-scale information campaigns familiarising the general public with the fact that this language is already being used worldwide on a regular basis by people from very different linguistic backgrounds.

References and further reading

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