

Why Esperanto Suppresses Language Diversity:

Thoughts On Leaving the Esperanto Movement

Christopher Culver

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For nearly a decade, from 1995 to the first days of 2005, I was an speaker of Esperanto, the 'international language' initiated in 1887 by Warsaw oculist L.L. Zamenhof and actively used today by perhaps several tens of thousands of people. The depth of my involvement in the language and its movement was such that for some years I travelled exclusively by means of the language, gathered an international circle of friends among Esperantists, and even worked for a year as a volunteer in the central office of World Esperanto Association. In January 2005, however, I decided to leave Esperanto entirely. I had become increasingly vexed by its suppression of language diversity, an ironic characteristic of a movement which claims to strive for the appreciation of the languages of the world.

How Esperanto Presents Itself

Esperanto's roots lie in L.L. Zamenhof's understanding of language. As a young man in imperial Warsaw, Zamenhof was disturbed by the partition of the city's inhabitants into four uneasy communities (Yiddish, German, Russian, and Polish) based on their native tongues. Esperanto, he hoped, would provide a common ground for communication between the linguistic communities, eroding national divisions.

The largest international Esperanto organisation and the major lobbying force for the movement is World Esperanto Association (UEA) with headquarters in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. For the last couple of decades, World Esperanto Association has presented itself to various international bodies as an advocate of language rights and language diversity. It enjoys official relations with the United Nations and UNESCO.

Representatives of UEA are often present at the meetings of these organisations, as in March of 2005 when UEA president Renato Corsetti and activist Andy Künzli attended the yearly meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

The Prague Manifesto, launched at the World Congress of Esperanto in Prague in 1996, strongly claims that Esperantists appreciate language diversity. The fourth point of the Manifesto is for 'multilingualism', the fifth for 'language rights', and the sixth for 'language diversity'. In the decade since its launch, the Manifesto has often been presented to the public as a statement of principles that all Esperantists share.

Defence of national language is important, for language is culture, and inseparable from it. Language is the ultimate expression of human diversity. The effort to protect dying languages and to bring issues of language rights to the public's attention is to be praised. One would think, then, that the Esperanto movement and UEA its voice provides a valuable service.

The Reality of Esperanto

However, the concern of language protection so strongly expressed in lobbying is in fact betrayed within the movement. Indeed, from the very beginning the Esperanto movement has been reluctant to protect diversity. It is important to note that Zamenhof himself did not seem to accept the idea of language diversity, instead seeking to impose a single language on international discourse for, he thought, the sake of peace. In those early days of Esperanto, national languages are not seen as expressions of diversity, worthy of protection, but rather as obstacles to overcome. Little has changed.

To return to the Prague Manifesto, let us consider the fourth point, for multilingualism:

Every member of the community has made the effort to learn at least one foreign language to a communicative level ... We maintain that the speakers of all languages, large and small, should have a real chance of learning a second language to a high communicative level.

The 'one foreign language' to which the Manifesto refers is, of course, Esperanto. Instead of emphasising the need to learn *national* languages, representing valuable and often endangered local cultures, the Esperanto

movement considers its own artificial product a valid choice to fulfill the need for fluency in a second language. Furthermore, the point seems to accept this bare minimum of one language in addition to one's native tongue, and does not advocate the continual education in languages throughout life necessary to understand language diversity.

In the sixth point of the Prague Manifesto we see a bold statement for language diversity.

In the Esperanto community ... language diversity is experienced as a constant and indispensable source of enrichment. Consequently every language, like every biological species, is inherently valuable and worthy of protection and support.

Yet this goal contradicts the fifth point, for language rights.

In the Esperanto community the speakers of languages large and small, official and unofficial meet on equal terms through a mutual willingness to compromise.

Esperantists are so concerned with the notion of equality in communication that Esperanto is made mandatory and there is no space for the sharing of national languages. Language diversity cannot be a present reality if the use of a language is limited to its own small community with no cross-cultural exchange. In its zeal for putting two speakers on an (in any case unobtainable) 'even ground', the Esperanto movement destroys the diversity and multilingualism which it claims to support. In my experience, the idea of two people achieving some wonderful equality through Esperanto is appreciated and praised much more highly among Esperantists than is the flourishing of national languages.

For an organisation claiming to defend language rights, UEA is strangely silent concerning actual examples of language oppression. For example, as I write this supporters of the Mari language in the Republic of Mari El in Russia are facing enormous obstacles, including beatings and loss of their jobs. Yet, UEA issues no condemnation against this and similar denials of the right to use one's native language. The only 'injustice' which UEA seems to protest, to judge from the statements of its president Renato Corsetti, is the teaching of English as a foreign language.

To truly understand what the use and spread of Esperanto means for language diversity, however, we should examine its own body of speakers. Instead of protecting the native languages in its midst, Esperanto usually supplants them. Whenever two Esperantists meet, they are expected to

speak Esperanto regardless of any command of each other's language. Loyalty to Esperanto is meant to override curiosity about other cultures. It is obvious that this idea, applied vastly, cannot be reconciled with the public aim of protection of language diversity.

Indeed, Esperanto is so strongly obligatory that its use is expected among any two Esperantists even if they speak the same native language. The act of speaking in one's native language with an Esperantist of the same mother tongue, referred to with the Esperanto neologism *krokodilado*, is one of the great taboos of the Esperanto movement and generally invites a scolding from other members of the movement.

The argument may arise that people attend congresses for the sake of practising Esperanto and therefore it is inappropriate to speak other languages. The first response is that, provided that they understand one another, it is never inappropriate for two people to speak the native language of one or the other, for to do otherwise is to rule out any true cultural exchange. A second response is that Esperantists cannot be expected to limit this insistence on Esperanto to congresses, for many Esperantists look to congresses as ideal environments. Many times I have heard some Esperantist say 'How I wish the whole world were like an Esperanto congress!' The norms of congresses, including the censure of the use of any language other than Esperanto, would serve as models for all international communication, as well as for communication in international contexts between two people of the same native language.

Finally, the Esperanto movement's claim of equality in communication is ludicrous, as the movement has a core of extremely fluent and normative speakers whose speech is challenging to new or 'provincial' Esperantists. I have occasionally seen such inequality in fluency or dialect between two Esperantists that they could switch to a national language and speak at greater ease. Not only is language diversity suppressed for the sake of equality, but the goal of equality itself is ultimately neglected.

The Wasted Opportunity of Congresses

Esperanto congresses are often presented as an ideal way to visit a foreign country and learn about its culture. However, in sheltering them entirely from the local language, congresses give participants no true contact with the host country.

A tourist who visits a foreign nation and eats only at restaurants belonging to international chains, ignoring local cuisine, understandably limits his understanding of the local culture. Yet, the Esperanto movement be-

believes that tourists can truly have cross-cultural experiences when they speak only a foreign, constructed language and give no attention to the local language.

In 2001 TEJO, the youth section of UEA, ran a brief campaign to encourage the organisation of 'language festivals' at the city and regional level. These are events in which people could be exposed to many languages at a time and present their own language to the public, a noble idea. During the International Youth Congress of Esperanto in Strasbourg in 2001, a language festival was part of the programme and all participants of the congress were encouraged to attend. However, this experiment was not repeated, and the Esperanto community has in the subsequent years shown little interest in driving its members towards an appreciation for language diversity.

Until Esperanto congresses focus entirely on the culture of the host country and the cultures represented by participants, requiring all present to familiarise themselves with these and reserving Esperanto as a (admittedly occasionally useful) last resort, Esperanto congresses will continue to suppress language diversity.

Wasting of Public Resources

The Esperanto movement's activities go beyond mere lobbying to use of public funds. UEA's youth section TEJO receives thousands of euro annually from the Council of Europe for projects which propagate this suppression of language diversity. TEJO mainly uses this funding to organise seminars on vacuous themes such as 'project management' or 'youth co-operation'. With the exception of a seminar on organising language festivals in 2001 (for TEJO's brief campaign) I cannot think of a single seminar where the public funding was truly used for the furthering of language diversity. Indeed, a frequent criticism of these seminars is they seem to have little effect beyond raising a new generation of activists who will in turn organise more meaningless seminars.

Esperanto is not a harmless hobby enjoyed by aficionados in their personal time, but rather it is deeply involved with public institutions. Yet, the consequences of the movement's ideals are undesirable for the public which these institutions serve.

Better Than English?

Esperantists often say that they are standing up to a worldwide hegemony of English, but it is clear that Esperanto imposes its own hegemony so strictly that even English could be called preferable. I have seen far more interest in learning and practising other languages in English-using international circles than among Esperantists.

During recent travels to Spain, I had the opportunity to observe participants in a pan-European seminar on youth and globalisation. While English was the default language of this group, in conversations between any two people the participants would often switch to the native language of one or the other. For example, a young man from France would greet another in English, but upon discovering that his conversation partner is from Italy, would switch to Italian. This would not find approval among Esperantists. Ironically, English proves the neutral choice here. It is often seen as a sure bet for international communication among young people in many countries, but it is well understood that other languages may serve just as well. In the Esperanto movement, on the other hand, there is an ideological attachment to Esperanto which mandates its use even if there are other, more culturally rich possibilities.

Esperanto tends to impose its vocabulary upon the native languages of its speakers just as English is so often assailed for. In his book *Esperanto sen mitoj* ('Esperanto without myths', Antwerp: Flandra Esperanto-Ligo, 1999) author Ziko Marcus Sikosek gives a hypothetical German-language conversation among a local workgroup absurdly riddled with Esperanto parlance, a phenomenon that nearly all Esperantists have experienced. One can see immediately the kind of detrimental effect Esperanto can bring.

Da hat ein *estrarano* von TEJO geschrieben, daß er einen *kontribuo* für den *internacia vespero* oder das *distra programo* hat. Gibt's dafür 'n *rabato*? Sein *aliĝilo* und die *antaŭpago* haben wir. Dann beträge seine *kotizo* als *memzorganto* und *B-landano* noch 50 Mark.

(Sikosek 1999: 166)

Alternatives

There are ways to meaningfully improve the lot of national languages and enjoy the same benefits which Esperanto claims to provide without being

involved with the Esperanto movement.

Instead of supporting the duplicitous work of World Esperanto Association, one should give attention to other organisations for language protection, such as Onze Taal in Holland or the Youth Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples (MAFUN) in Finland, Estonia, Hungary, and Russia.

Esperanto congresses are fun international events, but one can find the very same ambience at a summer language course. Instead of spending your holidays among Esperantists, speaking their artificial language and ignoring national cultures, consider registering in a course on an endangered minority language, where you can conscientiously help to preserve a valuable and threatened culture while still enjoying tourism and sight-seeing.

If you are a citizen of a member country of the Council of Europe, consider writing to your representatives to protest the Council of Europe's funding of the activities of World Esperanto Association's youth section, which do nothing to further the goal of a truly diverse Europe. Protest UEA's representation in formal supranational meetings. The claims of Esperantists about the goals of their movement should be met and refuted so that governments can provide productive undertakings for their citizens.

Esperanto is clearly detrimental to language diversity. I hope the public will better understand the urgent need for protection of national languages and will see that Esperanto is not only unproductive to such goals, but in fact threatens the 'rainbow' of languages.