

Esperanto leads to many cultures ~ including universal

And it is this: by learning Esperanto, a man may have access to at least two cultures, one national and one universal, whose roots and bases are to be found within himself; and he may also gain access to a very large number of other national cultures. I should like to deal with these points separately, and I shall begin with the second of them, as its significance is perhaps easier to grasp.

The Esperantist has access to a wide range of translated literature drawn not only from the languages of major diffusion, but also from the smaller ethnic cultures. Esperanto has at least four advantages over other languages in this field. Firstly, translations into Esperanto are normally made by native speakers of the original language, while translations into national tongues are normally made from a foreign language into the translator's native tongue. Secondly, Esperanto is syntactically enormously flexible and therefore capable of closely imitating particular features of the original languages without distorting or compromising its own nature, while national languages tend to be syntactically inflexible. Thirdly, among Esperantists translation is not a rather despised art, as it is among many, though not all, national cultures; it attracts major creative talents. Fourthly, being rich in rhyme it is an unusually suitable medium for very faithful translation of poetry.

To the Esperantist, the world is his oyster

Of course, poor translations have been published in Esperanto, as in every other tongue,

but the total of veritable success is a huge one, and your English Esperantist, for example can acquire a knowledge of Hungarian, Bulgarian, Estonian, modern Icelandic, Vietnamese, Chinese and Polish literature - to name only a few random - not easily obtainable by other means. The world is his oyster. Nor is his cultural opportunity purely literary in nature; he can inform himself of other aspects of the most various national cultures straight from the horse's mouth, either through books or, naturally, by free and untrammelled private correspondence - untrammelled, at any rate, by linguistic restrictions. His use of a second language is quite simply not restricted geographically, as it normally is with the use of a second national tongue.

Easier to learn than any single national language

Hence, even were there no indigenous Esperanto culture, there would be a strong cultural justification for learning the language; and schoolteachers, for example, who extol the undoubted cultural advantages obtained through the study of a single national language - so extremely difficult and time-consuming to acquire - should ask themselves whether the case is not every bit as persuasive for a wider-based cultural ethos to be enjoyed through the study of Esperanto, so relatively easy and swift to acquire.

Esperanto ~ a natural vehicle for a universal culture

But this brings me back to my other point, that your Esperantist has access to two cultures, largely separate but by no means mutually exclusive, whose roots are there within his own personality. I have called these national and universal.

A national culture, by definition, consists very largely of those things which identify the nation as different from other nations, and is associated with the nation's history, geography, political philosophy, and, of course, language. Sometimes this agglomeration of largely random factors which serve to distinguish ethnic groups from one another assumes such importance that it obscures the equally important fact that a very great part of every individual's personality and ambience consists of factors which are universal to the human race. These include such fundamental characteristics as hunger, love, anger, aspiration, moral sense, fear and sex. Upon these universal qualities the very notion of cultural universality is founded, and they form the basis of a universal culture, of which Esperanto is the natural and appropriate vehicle.

In fact, more "natural" than any "national" language

It is at least arguable that the universal characteristics found in the individual are "natural," while the national characteristics are "artificial," because, while the universal characteristics appear to be present in every human being from birth, wherever and into whatever social group he happens to be born, national characteristics have to be acquired - through parents, social peers, and, mainly, educationalists. A knowledge of national history is not inborn, but acquired. The subtlety and allusion of which literary language is full has to be learned through a long and arduous course of study - and very many individuals never acquire it.

One cannot deny that national culture exists - but it exists only because we say it does, and innumerable national cultures have disappeared because people ceased to care about them; a few have even been revived because people started to care about them once more.

An expression of brotherhood and desire for peace

Similarly, a universal culture is possible only as long as people exist who care about it, despite the fact that the bases for it exist naturally. It has been characteristic of Esperanto-speakers for four generations now, that they have cared about the cultural bases underlying the very concept of an international language. Countless thousands of people all over the world have not been content to treat Esperanto as no more than a useful tool - which it undoubtedly is - but have looked upon it as an expression of human brotherhood and the aspiration to live at peace with one's fellow men. One may agree or disagree with them; but it is no accident that fanatical nationalists of the Hitler type have seen fit to persecute people only because they were Esperantists. One may agree or disagree with them, but one cannot lightly dismiss the fact that Esperanto today has a history going back beyond the memory of even its oldest living speaker, that it possesses a literature which expresses ideals and hopes of a universal nature, and that it has inspired the kind of loyalty that men give only to the things which seem to them culturally valuable. There is a cultural basis underlying Esperanto, whether or not the fact is pleasing to this or that individual.

No cultural contradiction ~ no "replacement" of any language

There need be no contradiction between a man's national culture and his universal culture. No one today would seriously suggest that Esperanto might in any sense "replace" national languages. It was Zamenhof himself who said: "... the true patriotism is a part of the great worldwide love that builds, conserves and enhances everything. The Esperanto ideal, which preaches love, and patriotism, which also preaches love, can never be inimical to one another." To love what is ours does not imply hatred of that which is not ours but someone else's; to love our fellow men in another country, it is not necessary to hate our own.

Esperanto fills the need for worldwide understanding

Esperanto encourages worldwide understanding and international friendship. It does not solve all our problems, it does not make war impossible, Of course. But it does solve one pressing problem: the need, in this age, for people all over the world to be able to communicate and understand one another. To understand a person one must know something of his cultural background; Esperanto makes this more widely possible than any other single language.

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The Cultural Value of Esperanto

By William Auld

It's a well-known that by learning a second language one can gain entrée to a second culture. This has always been a fundamental argument used to justify, for example, language teaching in schools. By learning a foreign language, a man may acquire two cultures: one native and one foreign. The extent to which he actually acquires the foreign culture will, of course, depend on many factors, including, for example, how well he manages to get know the language concerned, and how much time, if any, he spends among people whose native language it is.

It is sometimes thought that Esperanto lacks this dimension. To some people, the fact that Esperanto seems to lack a national or geographically localized basis suggest that a basis for any kind of indigenous culture does not exist among Esperanto speakers. Such a supposition is too naive by half; if it were true, then communication by means of Esperanto would inevitably break down at all levels beyond the crudest and simplest expression achieved by pidgin English or by using the few words of schoolboy French that is all most of us remember from our classroom years. Since this is not what actually happens - as everyone may confirm for himself by attending, for example, an international conference where Esperanto is used - then the truth must be somewhat different.