

## WHAT IS ESPERANTO?

In 1887 Dr. L. L. Zamenhof (1859-1917) published his *Lingvo Internacia* (International Language) under the pseudonym “Dr. Esperanto” (“one-who-hopes”).

Esperanto was proposed as an easy-to-learn second language that would allow people who speak different native languages to communicate, yet at the same time to retain their own languages and cultural identities.

When using another person’s native language to communicate, the average person isn’t able to express himself as well as the native speaker or gifted linguist. Thanks to its simple, logical, regular design, you can learn Esperanto fairly rapidly and put it to practical use much more quickly than any other language.

## WHY WAS ESPERANTO CREATED?

Dr. Zamenhof, a Russian Jew born in the city of Bialystok in what is now Poland, explained this in a private letter in 1895:

“In Bialystok the population consisted of four different groups: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews; each spoke a different language and was hostile to the other groups.

“...I was taught that all men were brothers, and, meanwhile, on the street, in the square, everything at every step made me feel that people did not exist, only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews, etc. Since at that time it seemed to me that grown-ups were all-powerful, I kept telling myself that when I grew up I would certainly do away with this evil.” (1)

As Zamenhof matured he came to realize that a common second language would not by itself solve the world’s problems. We have seen this in our own national history, for instance in the Revolutionary War and in the Civil War, each of which had speakers of English on both sides. (2) But as Edward Symoens so correctly states:

“The roots of conflict are in the human heart and mind, and in the society made by human beings. However, it remains true that a common, neutral language would make it possible for all parties concerned to discuss these difficulties and conflicts, and try to find solutions jointly. Discussions at present, conducted via interpreters, are not really discussions but merely parallel communications. Too many nuances are lost, too many misunderstandings persist.” (3)

The problems of communication between people still prevail today. But most of us in the United States are not aware of these problems because of our relative cultural and geographic isolation.

Esperanto was developed in a part of the world in which dozens of languages competed for use. It has been said that you can go 100 miles in any direction in Europe and find yourself needing to use a different language. This is just as true today as it was 100 years ago when Esperanto was created.

Language predominance changes throughout history and is often the result of national political or economic advantage. In the late 1880s, when Esperanto was developed, French was considered the language of international use. Before French, Latin played the same role. At present, we in the English speaking countries are fortunate that our language is used in many parts of the world.

But is that situation one that will endure? Only time can answer that, but if history repeats earlier cycles, as it has done many times in the past, we can expect a major shift in language dominance sometime in the not-so-distant future.

Speakers of “languages of greater diffusion” (languages with speakers in many locations) often find themselves at an advantage, both economically and culturally, over others. Intentional or not, this form of linguistic discrimination can have a devastating effect on people from “less important” cultures and countries. This does not have to happen.

## WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF ESPERANTO?

- 1) It doesn’t replace anyone’s language. It simply serves as a common second language for all.
- 2) It can be learned in less time than any other language, and used with more confidence.
- 3) It is politically unbiased, giving no country or group an unfair advantage over others.
- 4) It has already been tested, accepted and used in more than 100 countries for more than 100 years.

## WHY DO PEOPLE LEARN ESPERANTO?

By choosing to learn the politically and culturally neutral language Esperanto, you can meet others on a level of linguistic equality. The act of choosing Esperanto affirms your respect for other peoples, their languages and cultures, by

showing your willingness to make an effort to communicate in a way that does not give you an unfair advantage.

Many people learn Esperanto for practical reasons as well. For example:

- ◆ Because of its logical and streamlined systems of grammar and word-formation, Esperanto can be learned and put to use far more quickly and easily than any other language.
- ◆ The speaker of Esperanto has access to a cross-cultural literature that is one of the most diverse in the world.
- ◆ Many people learn Esperanto because it helps them understand their own language better and greatly aids in the learning of other foreign languages.
- ◆ International correspondence and travel through Esperanto open up far wider possibilities for personal contact than would otherwise be available.

## WHAT ABOUT ESPERANTO TODAY?

Since Esperanto's introduction in 1887, the number of speakers has increased from only one individual to hundreds of thousands of speakers in over 120 countries. Since 1985, there has not been a single day when there wasn't an international Esperanto conference or meeting somewhere in the world.<sup>(4)</sup>

Today, there are thousands of books and periodicals available from all parts of the world, with new books being published monthly. Daily radio programs are increasing, and many available over the internet. Esperantists are regularly attending virtual meetings via Skype or Second Life.

Special interest groups with an international following have sprung up, using Esperanto to communicate their messages throughout the world. Conferences held in Esperanto are occurring throughout the world every day of the year.

## FOOTNOTES

- (1) Eichholz, Rudiger and Vilma, ed. *Esperanto in the Modern World*. Bailieboro: Esperanto Press, 1982.
- (2) Note, however, that to some extent the Revolutionary War was simply an episode in a wider and long-lasting conflict for global domination between speakers of English and speakers of French.
- (3) Symoens, Edward. *The Socio-Political, Educational and Cultural Roots of Esperanto*. Antwerpen: Internacia Ligo de Esperantistaj Instruistoj, 1989.
- (4) Claude Piron – *The language challenge -- facing up to reality*. (YouTube)

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# ESPERANTO

## THE IDEA

## BEHIND THE

## LANGUAGE

What is Esperanto?

Why do people learn it?

What are the advantages of knowing it?

You'll find the answers to these common questions about Esperanto inside...