

Language For a Changed World

Can a centuries old manufactured language find a place in 2008? **Tim Stackpool** thinks so. With the advent of internet chatrooms and telephony, exponents of Esperanto are finding new ways to practice their language and reviving world interest. After failing to have Esperanto accepted as the official language of the EU, Esperantists have taken to cyberspace with thousands of young people now learning and speaking the 'language of the Global Village'.

WEB LEARNING:

www.esperanto.net
www.lernu.net
www.esperanto.org.au
www.cursodeesperanto.com.br
www.melburno.org.au
kurso.esperanto.org.au



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Esperanto finds new life on the internet. -Tim Stackpool

ESPERANTO, the manufactured language devised by a Polish doctor in the 19th century, is enjoying a renaissance in the 21st century, thanks to exponents practising the language using instant messaging services such as MSN and Skype internet telephony. Almost extinct by the end of the 20th Century, there is now a myriad of websites written entirely in Esperanto, with speakers of the language, who call themselves 'Esperantists', building diverse communities across the World Wide Web.

Esperanto was developed in the late 1800s by an eye doctor in Poland, Dr. Ludovic Zamenhof, who devised the language and subsequently published it under the pseudonym *Doktoro Esperanto*. The number of speakers grew rapidly over the next few decades, at first primarily in Russia and Eastern Europe, then in Western Europe and the Americas, China, and Japan. A quick search for Skype contacts today, sorted by language, returns more than a handful for Esperanto speakers reaching from Australia to the Faroe Islands.

During the rise of the Soviet Union, Esperanto was sometimes used as the language of the anti-soviet resistance, safe from being understood by official members of the Polit Bureau. Earlier, Adolf Hitler identified Esperanto in *Mein Kampf* as a dangerous language that could be used to achieve world dominance by an international Jewish Conspiracy. As a result, this led to the persecution of Esperantists during the Holocaust, although the language has no direct ties to Judaism.

The word 'Esperanto' means 'one who hopes' and Zamenhof's goal was to create an easy and flexible language as a universal second language to foster peace and international understanding. Although no country has adopted the language officially, it is thought there are between 100,000 and 2 million speakers. By some estimates, there are about a thousand native speakers, who generally learnt the language as a child, taught by parents who use Esperanto as their preferred language.

While it is widely accepted that Esperanto is an easier language to learn than others, that does not necessarily make Esperanto a simple language to learn. However, as a constructed language, it is devoid of the myriad of exceptions to grammatical rules plagued by 'developed languages', English being one of the worst, and subsequently one of the hardest to learn by the non-native speaker. Every letter of the Esperanto alphabet has a dedicated sound, irrespective of where, or what order it appears within the word. Therefore, the main benefit of Esperanto is that it is a systematic, regular language. Word building is one of the most attractive elements of Esperanto, as it enables the speaker to be more expressive in the language from an earlier point in the learning process. As an example, if the speaker does not know the Esperanto word for 'war' is *milito*, an acceptable alternative might be *mal-paco*, the opposite of peace. These constructed words, as long as they follow the mere 16 grammatical rules, are technically and grammatically correct.

Advocates of Esperanto have for years tried to have the language recognized as a useable common language for the United Nations, and more recently for the EU. Esperantists often agree that no ethnic language could ever gain acceptance as the international language of the world, owing to the natural opposition of speakers of other ethnic languages. Thus, they argue, the world will have to adopt an ethnically neutral language like Esperanto, if it is to ever have an efficient means of international communication. Since the wide acceptance of English as a medium of international communication in the second half of the 20th century, Esperantists now also place emphasis the language's comparative ease to learn, its neutrality and its linguistic diversity.

Esperanto isn't without its competitors in the realm of 'manufactured' languages. Take computer programming for example. C++, Visual Basic, Java, HTML and the ancient Fortran, although all derived from English, could well be considered legitimate languages, albeit with copyright attached. In terms of spoken languages, the Esperanto spin-off *IDO* is still spoken by individuals, so too is *OCCIDENTAL*, *NOVIAL* as well as the more modern *INTERLINGUA*.

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Esperanto speakers offer each other free worldwide accommodation

But when it comes to international and on-line communities, Esperanto speakers win hands down. There are extensive free online and downloadable software teachers available, newsgroups and chatrooms. Given that international understanding and cultural acceptance is at the root of the language, every year there are dozens of Esperanto festivals and conventions, from weekend events in Italy, Germany, France, to events hosted by the Himalayan Esperanto Association in Nepal. Local groups around the world meet regularly in pubs and cafes. The largest official gathering is the World Congress of Esperanto, drawing thousands of people from all over the world and is held in a different country every summer, from Japan to Italy to Brazil to China to Poland.

Each year, a holiday directory of Esperanto speakers in 89 countries who offer **free** accommodation to other speakers of Esperanto is published. Called *Pasporta Servo*, the book updates a list of hosts who open their homes and share a part of their lives in a way that epitomises the cultural fundamental of Esperanto. The *Pasporta Servo* directory is updated yearly by the World Organization for Young Esperantists.

Today, with significant thanks to the internet, Esperanto is subsequently employed in world travel, correspondence, cultural exchange, conventions, literature, language instruction, television and radio broadcasting.

Vatican radio itself has regular programs transmitted in Esperanto. Both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have delivered blessings in Esperanto. Some state education systems, including those in China, offer elective courses in Esperanto. Interestingly, there is also some evidence to suggest that learning Esperanto is a useful preparation for later language learning. Students who have completed study in Esperanto to a competent level subsequently excel at learning other languages.

It's doubtful whether Esperanto will ever become the world's only language, nor do Esperantists expect it to be. However, the concept of a single common second language that we all speak does have its charm, and certainly is a conceivable step towards cultural understanding and ultimately, world peace.

