



# Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks

Language Politics, Digital  
Media and the Making of an  
International Community

Guilherme Fians

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Guilherme Fians  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Brasília  
Brasília, Brazil

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*Esperanto is a language like any other – except when it isn't.*  
(Humphrey Tonkin, 2020, personal communication)

*We're not as numerous as we wanted, but we're more than you can imagine.*  
(Anonymous Esperantist from France, 2017)

*For Ngân and Regina,  
the women of my life*

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This book began as a simple quest for answers and never ended. But it never ended for a very good reason: one question constantly led me to others and I frequently encountered people along the way who pushed me further. I started to write it almost on my own. Yet, similarly to Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*—but in a much less poetic manner—at the end of it, we were quite a crowd, with a number of people sharing an interest in what I was doing, thinking with me and encouraging my endeavour.

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## About the Author

**Guilherme Fians** is Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Brasília (Brazil) and Co-Director of the Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems (Netherlands/USA). He holds a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Manchester (UK), where he also taught for three years. His research interests and publications revolve around social movements, nationalism, language politics and digital media, with a focus on France. In line with his commitment to multilingualism in academia, his publication track record includes articles and books in English, Portuguese, French, Esperanto and German.

# Glossary and List of Acronyms

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Akademio de Esperanto | The Academy of Esperanto, the institutional body responsible for overseeing and stewarding the development of the language   |
| Amikumu               | A GPS-based mobile phone app through which users can locate and contact learners and speakers of the same language nearby  |
| Babilrondo            | Debate circle, held weekly at SAT-Amikaro's headquarters, in Paris, where people discuss contemporary politics in Esperanto  |
| Duolingo              | Language learning platform, available on a website and mobile phone app, offering several gamified language courses free of charge   |
| Esperantist           | Those who speak Esperanto regularly and/or join Esperanto associations and the movement as activists, volunteers and members, and who participate in the Esperanto community     |
| Esperanto speaker     | Those who are learning or who can speak Esperanto, regardless of fluency, but who do not use the language on a regular basis nor claim to participate in the Esperanto community |

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Espéranto-France       | French National Esperanto Association, headquartered in Paris. Affiliated to UEA, it is the French national representative of the neutral Esperanto movement  |
| Esperanto-movado       | Esperanto movement  |
| Esperantujo/Esperantio | Esperanto community, sometimes referred to in English as <i>Esperantoland</i>   |
| Finvenkisto/Fina venko | <i>Finvenkismo</i> refers to the aspiration of making Esperanto effectively universal, as the de facto global language. The ardent promoters of the <i>fina venko</i> (the final victory) are called <i>finvenkistoj</i> , even though few Esperantists would adopt this term as self-referential |
| Homaranismo            | Political and philosophical programme envisaged by Zamenhof to inspire Esperantists to perceive humankind as a brotherhood of peoples, regardless of one's origins or background. <i>Homaranismo</i> is the basis of what this book calls Esperanto's 'humanist cosmopolitanism'                  |
| <i>Interna ideo</i>    | Inner idea. Closely linked to Homaranismo, it conveys Zamenhof's intent to use Esperanto to promote fraternity and justice among peoples  |
| JEFO                   | Junulara Esperanta Franca Organizo, French Esperanto Youth Organisation, also known as Espéranto-jeunes. Headquartered in Paris, it occasionally uses Espéranto-France's headquarters for its activities and gatherings   |
| Pasporta Servo         | Hospitality service oriented at Esperantists and based on a directory (printed and online) of potential hosts and guests. Works similarly to services such as Couchsurfing.com, having preceded the latter  |
| Samideano              | Fellow thinker, referring to those who both speak Esperanto and partake of its <i>interna ideo</i>  |
| SAT                    | Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda, World Non-National Esperanto Association. Headquartered in Paris, it is a major organisation in the left-wing, workers' Esperanto movement  |



|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| SAT-Amikaro | Union des Travailleurs Espérantistes de Langue Française, Union of Esperantist French-Speaking Workers. Headquartered in Paris, it is the French-speaking wing of SAT |
| TEJO        | Tutmonda Esperantista Junulara Organizo, World Esperanto Youth Organisation, headquartered in Rotterdam   |
| UEA         | Universala Esperanto-Asocio, Universal Esperanto Association. Headquartered in Rotterdam, it is the leading organisation in the neutral Esperanto movement            |

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# 1

## In the Beginning Was the Word

In 2003, the renowned linguist Noam Chomsky was invited to give a series of interviews, in English, at Stony Brook University. In the second part of these Stony Brook Interviews, the linguist Mark Aronoff asked Chomsky why, in his opinion, the increasing interest that linguists once had in ‘universal languages’ had almost vanished between the early twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. Referring specifically to Esperanto, a constructed language designed to be used for international communication, the defining part of Chomsky’s answer was:

So, now it’s understood that Esperanto is not a language. It’s just parasitic on other languages. Then comes a question, which is not a linguistic question, but a question of practical utility. Is it more efficient to teach people a system which is parasitic on actual languages, and somewhat simplifies, eliminates some of the details of actual historical languages; or is it more efficient just to have then a whole lot of languages? And I think it’s now pretty widely accepted that the latter is better and not hard.

Earlier on the same interview, Chomsky had evinced his miscomprehension of Esperanto by presenting it as a helter-skelter variation of

Spanish—which is curious, given that the creator of Esperanto was not familiar with Spanish. Most importantly, Chomsky argues that Esperanto could not be characterised as a ‘language’ because of its limited number of explicit grammar rules, which requires its speakers to constantly fill in Esperanto’s gaps with transfers from one’s prior knowledge of other languages. Yet, regardless of Esperanto being deemed by formal linguistics a ‘language’ or not, a loosely estimated two million people worldwide ensure Esperanto’s continuous use and survival. Among such Esperanto speakers, a dozen of them meet regularly at a small office in the thirteenth district of Paris, France, in the headquarters of the left-leaning association SAT-Amikaro.

Every Friday evening, SAT-Amikaro holds a *babilrondo*, a debate circle where people meet for informal conversations in Esperanto about contemporary politics. I first joined these debates in late September 2016, in my first week living in Paris. The topics discussed in previous weeks included the upcoming French elections, nuclear energy, mental health and linguistic discrimination. By contrast, that Friday’s debate was open: each participant was supposed to bring a newspaper or magazine article to present and discuss with the group.

That evening, by 6.30 p.m., sixteen Esperanto speakers had arrived and sat around the long table at SAT-Amikaro, chatting, nibbling on snacks and sipping drinks they had brought. Paul,<sup>1</sup> a retired Professor of Medicine, kicked off the debate by presenting a newspaper article from *Le Monde diplomatique* about recent scholarly research on what motivates people to smoke and to quit smoking. Commenting on the article, he argued that human beings always do the opposite of what they should do and end up sacrificing important things like their own health. Then, Gilbert shared an article he had received by e-mail from the Union des fédéralistes européens. As a member of this association, he often received newsletters supporting European federalism and the strengthening of the European Union. Highlighting the commonalities between

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<sup>1</sup> All the personal names in this book are pseudonyms in order to preserve the identity of my interlocutors. These pseudonyms are based on popular names according to my interlocutors’ nationality, age and sex. The exceptions are historical and public figures, to which I refer by name and surname.

Esperanto's international character and European integration, he enthusiastically claimed that 'were Zamenhof [Esperanto's creator] alive today, he would surely support European federalism!'<sup>2</sup> Unbuttoning the collar of his Post Office staff shirt, Gilbert rushed to add that Esperanto could even play a role in the EU, since an international language built with elements of European languages could underplay nationalisms among EU countries. Yet, other participants of the *babilrondo* did not seem equally supportive of federalism. Valentin, a retired manual labourer in his late sixties, took off his dark green forage cap, put it on the table with a gesture of dismissal and grumbled that 'no matter how much we change the EU, it will still be a result of capitalism trying to co-opt every social relation into a commercial framework'.

Next, Pascal—a middle-aged statistician who worked at the French Ministry of Agriculture and Fishing—contributed to the debate with an article about José Mujica, a former president of Uruguay. He had found the text on a previous issue of *Sennaciulo* (The Non-National), an Esperanto periodical edited by Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda (SAT, the World Non-National Esperanto Association, an association linked to SAT-Amikaro). The article argued that Mujica was one of the few twenty-first-century politicians who legitimately stood for minorities and the working classes. Pascal's comments about the article elicited vibrant reactions from other participants and quickly became the focus of that evening's discussion. As I was the only Latin American in a room filled with French nationals, one Croatian and one Tunisian, Pascal turned to me to ask a number of questions about politics, electoral systems and protests against past and current presidents in Latin America.

The participants were surprised with some of the things I said, and Pascal complained: 'We don't hear much about Latin America in the mainstream French media, that's why we need this kind of debate here!' Later, wielding his copy of *Sennaciulo*, he added: 'Without *Sennaciulo* and our debates here, I would have known nothing about him [Mujica] and Uruguayan politics!' Using Esperanto as a means to gain access to

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the conversations referred to concern linguistic exchanges originally carried out in Esperanto translated into English by myself. Throughout the book, direct transcriptions and quotes that were originally in a language other than Esperanto will be indicated.

information they would perhaps not obtain otherwise, the Esperanto speakers gathered at SAT-Amikaro frame these weekly debates as horizontal learning spaces, where federalist postmen, communist manual labourers, anarchist public servants—and, sometimes, an anthropologist—discuss left-leaning political topics and learn from each other's perspectives and experiences.

Yet Esperanto also bears relevance beyond the framework of political debates and activism. In online settings, for instance, young speakers frequently use Esperanto to talk about travelling and programming or to practise foreign languages with Esperanto speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. Posting online in other languages to reach out to non-Esperanto-speaking publics, Esperanto speakers also mock their own niche interest in a 'useless' language. A commonplace way of expressing such form of self-deprecating humour is through one of the most popular and fast-spreading tools to transmit ideas online: Internet memes consisting of humorous image posts (Fig. 1.1).

Whether to foster political debates, share the latest world news or make jokes, this international auxiliary language constructed in the late nineteenth century has consolidated its presence in the early twenty-first century. While it does not compete directly with languages more widely spoken in international contexts, such as English, Spanish, Arabic or Swahili, Esperanto has secured its existence as a living language through its continuous use in spoken and written forms by a lively speech community.

As a nationalism-free constructed language, Esperanto is not meant to replace hegemonic or minority languages, but rather to establish a linguistic middle ground for foreigners to communicate without resorting to anyone's mother tongue. Esperanto is assumed to be no one's first language, as nobody is raised in an Esperanto-speaking neighbourhood or similarly, fluency in it is not normally a requirement when people apply for jobs or move abroad. Esperanto is generally placed outside the realm of coercion, since people who do not want to learn or speak it are unlikely to feel some sort of constraint or an external obligation to do so. Initially supported by the bourgeoisie, intellectuals, revolutionaries and left-wing activists, Esperanto currently also draws the attention of young polyglots and geeks attracted by non-mainstream



Fig. 1.1 Comic strip in English, based on a widely used *exploitable* (i.e. an image easy to replicate and edit) and adapted by young Esperanto speakers, joking about several parent's reactions towards Esperanto language learning (Source Facebook page *Steve the silly and vagabond linguist*, retrieved September 2017)



intellectual activities. The latter groups often come across, study and use Esperanto through online courses and digital media, and occasionally compare it to fictional languages such as Tolkien's Elvish (*The Lord of the Rings*), Marc Okrand's Klingon (*Star Trek*) and George R. R. Martin's Dothraki (*Game of Thrones*). In its 130 years of existence, Esperanto has developed into a set of cosmopolitan principles, a widespread speech community and a language-based social movement, being alternatively seen as a hobby, an intellectual game and a language-based critique of the contemporary.

Those who are sceptical about Esperanto's present-day relevance tend to regard it as a utopian project that went wrong—an artificial language that aspired to universality but that ended up forgotten. Several of its enthusiastic supporters, by contrast, see it as a living language that contributes to fairer and more egalitarian communication, as a peace-promoting tool to bring together forward-thinkers committed to building a better world. Between a failed project circumscribed to the past and a future-oriented global justice movement, what is the place of Esperanto in the present?

Beyond such contrasting perceptions of 'the language of the past' and 'the language of the future', this book aims to map out the various constituencies in which Esperanto bears relevance in the present, taking the reader from left-leaning debate groups and alterglobalisation movements to international Esperanto meetings and online forums. Unpacking Esperanto-mediated relationships, code-switching and cosmopolitan sociabilities, this book asks: if Esperanto has been historically linked with radical politics, what is its current political relevance? Given that this speech community is unbounded and dispersed by definition, how do speakers gather and create contexts to communicate in the language? Relatedly, what impacts have communication technologies such as digital media had on the organisation of this speech community and language movement?

Research for this book was conducted through 13 months of face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork in 2016–2017 and a longer period of digital ethnography, from 2016 to 2020. This included long-term participant observation and semi-structured interviews, as well as complementary archival research. Concentrating my ethnographic fieldwork in Paris,

France—a place where, since the early twentieth century, this language has been closely associated with left-wing activism—this study transcended French territory as I followed Esperanto speakers, gatherings and publications, as well as online and face-to-face instances of communication in other places in Europe and in Asia.

This book proposes a novel approach to language politics and community-building by tracing Esperanto speakers' perceptions and practices regarding cosmopolitanism, digital media use, language ideologies and radical politics. At the heart of this inquiry is the question of what it takes to ensure the stability of a language that nearly no one is required to speak and of a speech community that cannot rely on inter-generational language transmission. I argue that the unsteady status of this language and the transient character of the materialisations of its speech community are actually central to what fuels the perception of Esperanto as a language that yields more egalitarian communication and an inclusive community.

## 1.1 Where to Begin the Construction of a Language?

It was in the late nineteenth-century Russian Empire, through the pen of Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, that a language called Esperanto began to take shape. Aiming to bring about a rapprochement of people from different national and linguistic backgrounds through mutual understanding, Zamenhof conceived Esperanto as a rational language that could address the nationalist-laden clashes between people living in Zamenhof's hometown, Bialystok. With fewer basic grammar rules and being more regular than the already existing languages at the time, Esperanto came to be linked to its creator's pacifist ideals of fraternity, solidarity and world peace, as analysed in the chapters to come. Throughout its history, Esperanto has been widely learned, spoken, forgotten and taken up again, having aroused the interest and support of people such as Leo Tolstoy, Jules Verne, Charles Chaplin, Marshal Tito and Tivadar Soros, as well as the disavowal of Ludwig Wittgenstein, George Orwell and Noam Chomsky. Whatever it is and whatever it is capable of, Esperanto seems

to have succeeded in continuously attracting people's attention and in gathering speakers, making it a phenomenon remarkable in itself.

Coming to think of it, it may sound a bit odd that several people communicate, formulate ideas and establish relationships with each other using words and structures that started in a single person's desk. With this in mind, before tracing the uses of Esperanto in various places, times and circumstances, a more immediate question arises: what kind of language is Esperanto?

Often classified as an international auxiliary language, Esperanto in its phonology, grammar, vocabulary and semantics draws heavily on Romance, Germanic and Slavic languages.<sup>3</sup> In terms of vocabulary, Zamenhof attempted to choose the most international roots<sup>4</sup> for the initial Esperanto words he coined. In practice, this meant root words present in most European languages, so that Esperanto could sound familiar to speakers of those languages. Its alphabet is based on the Latin script, with some letters having diacritics. Its spelling is phonemic, each letter corresponding to one phoneme and with the stress always on the penultimate syllable. In terms of morphology and syntax, Esperanto is agglutinative, with compound words formed in a head-final order. Words in Esperanto consist of a stem, occasionally with suffixes and prefixes attached to it, followed by a grammatical ending: for instance, *-o* indicates nouns, *-a* adjectives, *-e* adverbs, *-j* plurals and an accusative case ending *-n* marks the direct object in a sentence. Its dominant word order is SVO (subject + verb + object). However, this order is relatively flexible due to the morphological marking of the accusative, which allows Esperanto speakers to recognise the constituents of a sentence irrespective of the order of words in the sentence.

While natural or ethnic languages have no 'publication date' and develop organically as they are used by particular human groups

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<sup>3</sup> Esperanto has been comprehensively presented in both descriptive and prescriptive grammars. For my purposes here, I only approach its core linguistic features, partly based on Wells (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Such claims of internationality are frequently questioned by those who argue that Esperanto is not equidistant from all existing languages (Van Parijs 2011: 40–42) and that its European typology makes it less accessible to speakers of non-European languages (see Parkvall 2010). It is worth keeping in mind that Esperanto was created in a specific place and time and Zamenhof had more access to European languages than to any others, which accounts for the European weight in Esperanto's phonology, grammar and vocabulary.

(Miner 2011), Esperanto and its fundamentals can be traced back to one man. As highlighted by an Esperantist who I met at the 101st Universal Congress of Esperanto, in Slovakia, in 2016: ‘Esperanto is an interesting phenomenon, isn’t it? Because the language created its population, whereas what usually happens is the opposite: a population creates its language’. This dissimilarity, when measured against natural languages, is what characterises Esperanto as a constructed or planned language, accounting for its alleged artificiality. Yet, as in natural languages, the regular use of Esperanto also produces changes, updates and variations, as its diversifying speech community has made Esperanto into a living language that evolves organically from its planned fundamentals.

Just as with natural languages, Esperanto is also spoken by children. Among parents from different linguistic backgrounds who meet each other through Esperanto, it is common practice to raise bilingual or multilingual children and to use Esperanto as a home language. In addition, it may be that younger generations of a family become interested in Esperanto thanks to the older generations’ engagement with it. Yet, however organic the language may have become, these cases are not prevalent: the stability of the Esperanto speech community is continuously called into question insofar as language transmission along generational lines cannot be assumed to ensure Esperanto’s continuity.

Moreover, Esperanto is neither supported by governments nor is it widely used for the provision of services or education. Without being extensively taught at home or schools, most people take up Esperanto through self-learning. In the language’s early days, this occurred mostly through teach-yourself learning materials and books. These were—and still are—occasionally complemented by language tutoring by correspondence or phone, as well as by face-to-face courses offered at Esperanto associations. More recently, the Internet has enabled online language learning, which has brought a new wave of speakers to the community while reinforcing Esperanto’s position outside the framework of formal education.

Another aspect that configures it as a rather singular language has to do with its relation to spatiality: Esperanto is not an official or customarily spoken language anywhere, in any bounded location, neighbourhood,