

Acting for a Universal Language: The Role of the Performing Arts in the Development of the Esperanto Movement

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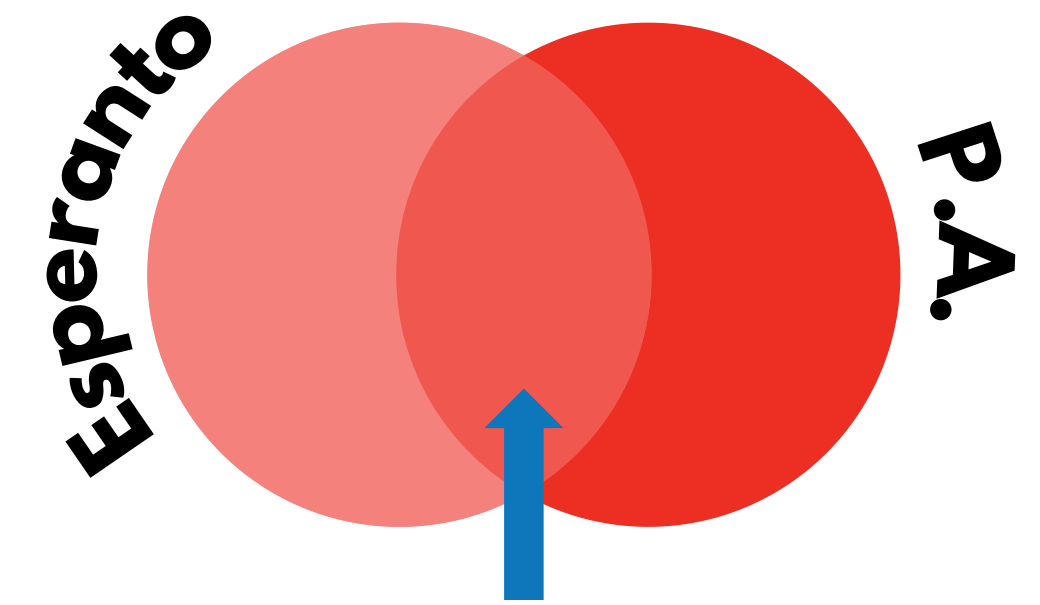
What is Esperanto?

- The most successful planned language in history
- Created by Ludwik L. Zamenhof, introduced in 1887
- Designed for easy acquisition:
 - 12 grammar rules, no exceptions
 - Amalgamation of Latin and Romance languages [1]
- Zamenhof's objective: international cooperation and a faster path to multilingualism [2]
- Speakers today: ~100k–2 million



Figure 1. 'L.L. Zamenhof', photograph, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Accessed 29 August 2024.

Why the performing arts?



Historic vehicles for activism/the promotion of millenarian ideals

INCEPTION: 1887-1914

State of the movement:

Just beginning. After Zamenhof introduced the language in 1887, Esperanto began to spread across Europe, largely promoted by affinity groups searching for community and to promote their own interests. [3]

Role of the performing arts:

Zamenhof strongly supported the performing arts in Esperanto. He believed that if literature and the performing arts could flourish in Esperanto, the movement would flourish, and if the arts failed to develop in Esperanto, the movement would fail. [4] Esperantists in this period also used the performing arts to test the language and their own linguistic theories:

- Jeanne Flourens (Roksano) wrote various comedic sketches to defend her belief that Esperantist writers should only use the worlds contained in Zamenhof's 1905 language manual *Fundamento de Esperanto* [5]
- Universal Congress 1905: Molière's musical *Le Mariage Forcé* was performed in Esperanto by a company of amateur actors from 9 different countries, speaking 7 national languages. [6]

RECOVERY: 1945-1980

State of the movement:

Despite growing momentum for the movement throughout the early twentieth century, two world wars, rising fascism, and Stalinist influence decreased the number of speakers. [7]

Role of the performing arts:

Ivo Lapenna, President of the World Esperanto Association (UEA), recognized recovering the movement required a concerted policy focus on improving the cultural level of Esperanto. This policy was called the 'Prestige Policy', largely centered on the performing arts. For instance, Lapenna developed various competitions promoting theatrical performance in Esperanto. [8] His commitment to the performing arts in Esperanto was also reflected in the 1956 'Principles of Frostvallen', which served as broad guidelines for the promotion of Esperanto. [9] As a result of the 'Prestige Policy', Esperantists expanded into a diversity of performing arts mediums, including cabaret, puppetry, and film. Most of the Esperanto literary greats penned at least two playtexts during this time.

SURVIVAL: 1980-2024

State of the movement:

Faltering, but surviving. Going through a movement-wide transition away from humanist cosmopolitanism (becoming a 'universal' language) and towards internationalist cosmopolitanism (characterizing itself as a 'constructed'/'artificial'/'international auxiliary' language. [10])

Role of the performing arts:

They have been important as a part of this ideological transition. The performing arts have been used to celebrate the diversity of nationalities within the movement. This has largely been the case at the Universal Congresses, where national anthologies of theatre playtexts fill pop-up Esperanto bookshops while national dances, music, and performances occur onstage. [11] By highlighting national diversity through the performing arts, Esperantists can emphasize the significance of the language as a bridge to national divisions.

References:

- [1] Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, 'What is Esperanto?', *The North American Review*, 184: 606 (1907).
 [2] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
 [3] Esther Schor, *Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the dream of a universal language* (New York, 2016), p. 157.
 [4] Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement* (The Hague, 1982), p. 69.
 [5] Pierre Janton, *Esperanto: Language, Literature, and Community* (New York, 2008), p. 97.
 [6] Bernard Long, *Esperanto: Its Aims and Claims: a discussion of the language problem and its solution*, (London, 1930), p. 58.
 [7] Forster, *The Esperanto*, p. 28.
 [8] Forster, *The Esperanto*, p. 237-238.
 [9] *Statuto kaj regularoj de Universala Esperanto-Asocio*, pp. 35-37, 1968., quoted in Forster, *The Esperanto Movement*, p. 238.
 [10] Guilherme Fians, *Esperanto Revolutionaries and Geeks: Language Politics, Digital Media, and the Making of an International Community* (Cham, 2021), p. 231-232.
 [11] *Ibid.*, p. 95, 240.



Figure 2. *Esperanto flag*, digital image, Wikipedia, https://hu.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/F%C3%A1jl:Flag_of_Esperanto.svg. Accessed 29 August 2024.