



Esperanto and the destiny of planned languages

by Herbert Mayer

The term 'planned language' covers more than you might expect: Pasigraphies (universal writing systems), secret sign languages (codes), ideographies (systems of graphical symbols), numeric languages, universal musical languages (such as Solresol), magical and sacral languages, and even imaginary languages like the Klingon language from the series "Star Trek". Not all artificial languages are planned languages. Only languages that are purposely developed to a planned system fall within the definition, which would for example exclude invented children's languages.

The best known planned languages are the world auxiliary languages, created with the ideal of facilitating international linguistic communication. The need for effective international communication became apparent in the nineteenth century with the growth of international interaction. Although French was the language of diplomacy at the time, Russian, English and German began to gain ground in international relations. Which of these languages would succeed as an international means of communication could not be predicted at the time. After World War I the idea of an international planned language came to the fore with strong proponents in the field of science, technology and terminology. Electrical engineers were a particular stronghold of Esperanto speakers, especially in France.

Few world auxiliary languages have persisted. Only Esperanto and Interlingua are of any significance today. Esperanto was created by Dr Lazar L Zamenhof, a Jewish optician born in Bialystok in Russia (now in Poland) in 1859. A climate of hate prevailed in the city between its Polish, Russian, German and Jewish inhabitants, which Zamenhof worked hard to overcome. His basic principle

was that the cultures and religions should conserve their own natures, but encounter between them can take place only on neutral terrain where no proponent dominated any other. In the spirit of his vision he adopted the pseudonym, Dr Esperanto, which means 'someone who hopes'.

The first Esperanto world congress was held at Boulogne sur Mer in France in 1905. It demonstrated that a constructed language worked in a broader setting. The congress gave the Esperanto movement a strong positive impulse, which lasted well into the 1930s, and showed that Esperanto was to be taken seriously as a solution to the language problem.

The aspiring movement was brought to an end by politics: Hitler's Germany-but also other fascist states such as Portugal and Japan-banned Esperanto. Many Esperanto speakers were killed in concentration camps, including two of the founders of the Esperanto museum, Gustav Weber and Alfred Mayr. From 1936, Stalin, at the other end of the political spectrum to Hitler, also began to liquidate the Esperanto movement. Although there was no formal ban, around 10,000 Esperantists were killed. Those who were lucky enough not to be arrested and tried in show trials kept their knowledge of Esperanto secret. It was only after Stalin's death that the Esperanto movement gradually became established again in the Soviet Union.

Currently about 3 million people speak Esperanto. There are associations and publishing programmes and World congresses are held annually with 2,000-6,000 Esperanto speakers from 50-70 countries. A number of international Esperanto organizations devoted to medicine and health are also active, including an international association of medical students. The Universala Medicina Esperanto-Asocio publishes an Esperanto medical journal, *Medicina Internacia Revuo* (<http://ttt.esperanto.org/umea/> access by pass word). This journal was founded in Japan in 1923 and is published twice a year. Up until the 1960s abstracts in several medical journals were published in Interlingua. Information about health (sano) can also be found on the web in Esperanto (e.g. <http://www.google.com/alpha/Top/World/Esperanto/Sano/>).

Esperanto is a regular language which is easy to learn and remember because of its simple but effective word building and because it only has 16 basic rules of grammar. The



The Department of Planned Languages and Esperanto Museum in Vienna was founded in 1927. It holds the biggest collection of artificial languages in the world and includes a linguistic research library for language planning. Even an Esperanto edition of *Asterix the Gaul* and a copy of a Klingon-English dictionary as used in the science fiction series *Star Trek* can be found amongst its tomes.

<http://www.onb.ac.at/ev/collections/esperanto/>



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vocabulary is based on European languages, especially on the Romance languages, and its grammatical system is similar to some Asian languages. Because it can be mastered relatively quickly Esperanto seemed to be a miracle to many of its speakers, and they felt compelled to inform the world of this excellent means of communication. However, the world is a cynical place and was not responsive to the message. There are still Esperantists who strive for Esperanto as a second language for all, according to the original ideals. Based on its linguistic qualities, Esperanto is in a position to solve the language problem once and for all. But this is not the only issue. The reason why Esperanto hasn't attained its goal is due to historical, political and economic circumstances. It would appear today that Esperanto is a long way from reaching its ultimate goal of solving the problem of global language.

There is however another group of Esperantists, for whom the language is simply an excellent tool for intercultural communication. This does not come into conflict with English, as almost every Esperanto speaker can also speak English. For this group of Esperantists, this international language community offers an alternative world wide web, in which everyone speaks their own language—namely Esperanto. Esperanto is not felt to be a foreign language but belongs to everybody who learns it, and is mastered by the Esperantists. A mouseclick in the Internet proves the vitality of these aspects of Esperanto.

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European Commission's initiative on scientific journals

A report commissioned by the European Commission put forward proposals to make scientific information freely available and at the same time safeguard scientific publishing. Its proposals include ranking journals by quality (which would encompass search facilities and copyright policies as well as scientific excellence), tax advantages for electronic publishers, and setting up a pan-European non-profit research archive (*BMJ* 2006;332:928). The Commission invites feedback on the report (http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/science-society/pdf/scientific-publication-study_en.pdf).

The publishing industry is facing the dual problems of increasing use of the Internet to find information and reductions in libraries' budgets. Subscriptions to journals have also decreased. (*hardly surprising with figures showing price increases of as much as 300% over inflation between 1975 and 1995*).

How we see W.C.

We have often heard it said in medical writing courses and read it in umpteen medical writing books, "Make no assumptions about other people's knowledge when it comes to the meaning of abbreviations". I found an example of such folly when sorting through my father's old papers.

A young couple about to be married were looking for a House' in the Country. Seeing the House and satisfying themselves it was suitable, they went home. On the return journey the young Lady was thoughtful, and when asked for the reason for her silence, replied, "Did you notice a W.C."

He not having done so, wrote immediately to the Landlord as to where it was situated. The Landlord did not understand what W.C. meant, and after thinking it over for a few hours came to the conclusion that it meant Wesleyan Chapel. He replied as follows:

Dear Sir,

I very much regret the delay in replying to your letter, but I have the pleasure of telling you that the W.C. is nine miles from the House and capable of seating 250 people.

This is very unfortunate for you if you are in the habit of going regularly, but you will be glad to know that a great many people take their lunch with them, and make a day of it, others that cannot spare the time, go by Auto, arriving just in time, but generally they are in such a hurry that they cannot wait.

The last time my wife and I went was 6 years ago, and we had to stand up all the time.

It may interest you to know a bazaar is going to be held to furnish the W.C., with Plush Seats as its Members feel it is long felt in want.

I mention the fact that it pains us not to go more often.

Yours faithfully,

The Oxford Dictionary of Abbreviations lists the following possibilities:

w.c.: watch committee, water closet, water cock, without charge

WC: British vehicle registration for Chelmsford, war cabinet, war council, water closet, Wesleyan chapel, postcode for west central London, Western Command (military), Whitley Council, working capital.

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¹ The capitalisation in this document, which I believe was written in the 1930s, is as originally printed.

Clinical trials to be overhauled

Elias Zerhouni, director of the National Institutes of Health, has warned that failure to spot serious side effects of drugs quickly enough is eroding public trust in medicine. He has announced an eight point plan to improve clinical trials and reduce the likelihood of side effects being swept under the carpet (*BMJ* 2006;332:991).