

Psychological Reactions to Esperanto

The following paper by Claude Piron first appeared in the French-language series Documents sur l'espéranto in the mid-1980s. The present translation by William Auld was published in the [English-language series](#) in 1995.

1. Differing reactions

To a psychologist investigating reactions to the word "Esperanto" two facts are immediately apparent: a high percentage of those invited to give their opinion have a great deal to say about it; and they regard as self-evident, and in many cases cite without prompting, various statements which are contrary to verifiable reality, for example: "no one has ever written a novel straight into Esperanto", "Esperanto is a language no one speaks", "there are no children who have it as the mother tongue", etc. Such convictions are well illustrated by a reader's letter in *Time* magazine from Peter Wells of Singapore:

Esperanto has no cultural history, no indigenous literature and no monolinguals or even first-language speakers. (Wells, 1987).

In addition, many of those questioned display every sign of emotional involvement. Some react enthusiastically, fervently. But the majority are patronising towards Esperanto, as though it were obviously childish. The person concerned makes it clear that Esperanto is not to be taken seriously, and his tone is disdainful, ironic or humourously condescending towards the "simple souls" who take it up.

If, in order to get a control reaction for comparison, the researcher asks the subject to give his or her opinion about Bulgarian or Indonesian in the same way, he gets quite a different response. The subject takes about a minute to recount in a perfectly neutral tone of voice everything he has to say about them, usually that he knows nothing.

The contrast is astonishing. It is seen to be all the more remarkable when his knowledge is tested by precise questions about literature, geographical distribution, subtlety of expression, etc. At once it becomes apparent that the subject's impressions about Esperanto are almost wholly erroneous, much more so than the tiny scraps of knowledge he can drag up concerning the control languages. Why is he aware of his incompetence in the one case and not in the other?

Presumably languages such as Bulgarian and Indonesian are seen as belonging to the realm of facts, while Esperanto is felt to be a proposal. Facts are bowed down to. Faced with a proposal, it is felt necessary to give a yes or a no and then defend that point of view. But why is Esperanto not seen as belonging to the realm of facts? And why does the reaction, so frequently, become so emotional? This involvement of the emotional range is not restricted to individual conversations, as witness the following quotation taken from an article on the teaching of Latin, an article otherwise expressed in a neutral and informative tone:

Gloire donc au latin, et à bas l'espéranto, mixture aux relents d'artifice et aux espérances déçues! (G.P., 1985).

[Long live Latin, then, and down with Esperanto, that hotchpotch stinking of artificiality and hopes betrayed!]

That sentence, unrelated to the remainder of the text, seems like an emotional eruption unexpectedly boiling up out of who knows what kind of depths. Why should this be?

2. Defence mechanisms

Analysed, the kind of statements about Esperanto or the wider field of international communication which can easily be obtained by inviting people to speak freely on the subject, or are put forward at official meetings devoted to this question, are found to be characterised by the action of the so-called "defence mechanisms". This is the name given to tactics unconsciously organised to avoid facing up to a reality felt to be threatening (Freud, Anna, 1937). Here are some examples:

(a) *Denial*. Esperanto is treated as non-existent in situations where it would be logical to take it into account. For example the volume *Le Langage* in the encyclopedic series *La Pléiade* (Martinet, 1968) which, in 1525 pages dealing with everything from slang and pidgin to translation and aphasia, contains no mention, not even a single paragraph, of the amazing phenomenon that a language known to only one person a hundred years ago is in use today in over a hundred countries. Similarly, the experience built up of Esperanto as a conference language is considerable; in 1986 there wasn't a single day during which there wasn't, somewhere in the world, a congress, a meeting or an international conference, at which Esperanto was the working language (a list appeared in *Heroldo de Esperanto* of 20th March 1986). When the UN, for example, is making a detailed analysis of the problems encountered in linguistic communication, it would be reasonable to consider this experience, if only to reject it, after examination, on explicit grounds. But this is not what happens. (King et al, 1977; Allen et al, 1980; Piron, 1980).

Even a linguist considering precisely the kind of communication daily realised through Esperanto approaches the question as if that experience had never happened:

While economists are exercised in creating a Eurodollar, why should we not try for a Eurolanguage too? (Lord, 1974, p. 40).

An industrialist's first reaction when confronted by a production problem is to consider all the solutions applied elsewhere, in order to find out, before looking for a new way out, whether there isn't a system somewhere that would suit him. This way of going about things, so natural in daily life, is practically never adopted where international communication is concerned. We are in fact faced here with a denial of reality, in the psychological sense.

(b) *Projection*. The fact of attributing to someone else psychic elements to be found in ourselves is known as projection. A good example is provided by the sentence:

Efforts to devise universal languages which could be adopted without prejudice and learned without trouble - languages like Esperanto - represent a noble intent combined with an essential ignorance of what language is and how it works. (Laird, 1957, p. 236).

Esperanto satisfies all the criteria linguistically accepted for defining a language (Martinet, 1967, p. 20). When an author, without checking and without basing his opinion on factual arguments, starts from the principle that this is untrue, is he not the very ignoramus he facetly sees others as? [On "how it works", see the article "L'esperanto, una lingua che funziona" by the Italian linguist Alessandro Bausani (1981)].

Traits making it out to be some kind of monstrous mutation are frequently attributed to Esperanto. This is how an American language teacher describes such a language (the text is a translation of a translation, as the original is not to hand):

A language, like love and the soul, is something that is human and alive, however difficult it is to define: it is a natural product of the spirit of an entire race, not of a single individual. Artificial languages are repulsive and grotesque, like people with a metal arm or leg, or with a pacemaker attached to their heart. Dr Zamenhof, like Dr Frankenstein, created a monster out of living bits and pieces, and, as Mary Shelley tried to tell us, nothing good can come out of that. (Arbaiza, 1975, p. 183).

Or, without justification, Esperanto is said to be
orienté vers la suppression graduelle des traditions (Accontini, 1984, p. 5).

[orientated towards a gradual suppression of traditions].

Such judgements are activated by unconscious fears and imaginings which are projected on to the language: instead of being studied as a linguistic, literary, social or psychological reality, it is treated like some kind of dream figure motivated by malicious intentions, with no perception of how delirious, in the psychiatric meaning of the word, such an attitude is.

(c) *Rationalisation*. Irrational viewpoints are justified by means of abundant convincing arguments. In other words, as in the classic paranoid speech pattern, the intellectual arguments are strictly logical. Only the lack of a basis in reality betrays its essential fantasy.

For example, to Esperanto is attributed an Indo-European inflected analytical character, which is explained by the fact that Zamenhof, so they say, only knew Indo-European languages. But none of these assertions was checked. In actual fact,

- An important place among Esperanto's traits is occupied by its multicultural substratum, in which the Asiatic and Hungarian contributions have played no small part (literary activity in the Esperanto language between the two world wars developed to a great extent in a Hungarian ambience, the so-called Budapest School; Hungarian is not Indo-European).
- Zamenhof knew a non-Indo-European language well: Hebrew, and his creation bears its stamp; for example, the semantic field of the morpheme *_ig* has an exact equivalent, among the languages he knew, only in the Hebrew *hif'il* (Piron, 1984, p. 26).
- Esperanto acts agglutinatively, not inflectionally. Statements in it can as easily be synthetic as analytic - it is just as acceptable to say *mi biciklos urben* as *mi iros al la urbo per biciklo*; textual research shows that synthetic forms are very frequent - and if it is true

that phonetically and lexically it is Indo-European, it assuredly is not so structurally: no Indo-European language consists, as it does, of strictly unalterable morphemes.

(d) *Isolation*. Isolation is the name given to the act of separating something from its context and making unrelated judgements about it. When someone says, of languages:

Il arrive aussi qu'il en naisse, mais jamais du néant: l'espéranto est un échec (Malherbe, 1983, p. 368).

[It happens, too, that languages are born, but never out of nothing: Esperanto is a fiasco],

he is isolating the international language from its context, historical as well as linguistic. In fact, Esperanto's place is in a long chain of experiments and meditations extending over several centuries. In Zamenhof's work its genesis was gradual, in many respects similar to linguistic evolution, just as the genesis of an embryo evokes that of the species; its gradual development is worth studying (Waringhien, 1959, pp. 19-49). On the other hand, the morphemes of which it consists have their roots in other languages; they are not elements "created out of nothing".

Esperanto was no more born out of nothing than was the Creole of Haiti. A language appears in response to a need. Among the slaves of various races in the Caribbean whose languages were reciprocally incomprehensible, there was a need to communicate with each other; out of this need was born a colourful language based largely on that of their white owners but structurally quite different. In the same way, between 1880 and 1910 a part of the world's population was longing to make contacts abroad and thirsted after a widening of cultural horizons, but found language learning impossible in their circumstances. These people seized on Zamenhof's project, and by using it transformed it into a fully living language. Neither Creole nor Esperanto was born from nothing; they were born of the same socio-psychological force: the desire to converse.

Now let us look at the following text:

Allez prendre un oiseau, un cygne de notre lac par exemple, déplumez-le complètement, arrachez-lui les yeux, substituez à son bec plat celui du vautour ou de l'aigle, greffez sur les moignons de ses pattes les échasses d'une cigogne, mettez dans ses orbites la prunelle du hibou (...); ensuite, inscrivez sur vos bannières, répandez et criez ces mots: "Ceci est l'oiseau universel", et vous vous ferez une petite idée de la sensation de glacement qu'a produit sur nous cette terri-fiante boucherie, cette vivisection nauséabonde, qu'on n'a cessé de nous prôner sous le nom d'espéranto ou langue universelle. (Cingria, pp. 1-2).

[Take a bird, perhaps one of our lake swans, pluck it completely, gouge out its eyes, replace its flat beak with a vulture's or an eagle's, graft on to its leg-stumps the feet of a stork, stuff an owl's eyeballs into the sockets (...); now indite your banners, propagate and shout the following words: "Behold the universal bird", and you will get a slight idea of the icy feeling created in us by that terrible butchery, that most sickening vivisection, increasingly offered to us under the name of Esperanto or universal language.]

Setting aside the picturesque (and ornithological) aspect of that quotation, and the words which reveal the extent of emotional reaction ("terrible butchery", "most sickening vivisection"), only two criticisms remain:

- (a) Esperanto results from human intervention in something living;
- (b) it is a heterogeneous language.

The above author's conclusion is rational only on three conditions:

- that language is a living being, like an animal;
- that human intervention in something living is invariably deleterious;
- that a heterogeneous language is unsuitable for communication.

Mesmerised by his nightmarish vision, the author isolates his vision from such considerations. He fails to see that likening a language to a living entity is no more than a metaphor that mustn't be taken too far. The bird he mentions would have suffered, terribly, but when Dutch spelling was reformed in the forties the language didn't cry out or need an anaesthetic.

Secondly, man often intervenes in living things with excellent results. Famine would be much more dramatic in India if new types of grain had not been successfully produced thanks to man's wholly conscious intervention in nature. And neither dogs nor roses nor bread would exist if man had not intentionally applied his talents to living things.

Thirdly, if heterogeneity were damning, English could not function satisfactorily. Linguistic analysis shows it to be more heterogeneous than Esperanto:

When we come to a language like English, we find ourselves dealing with several languages rolled into one. (Lord, 1974, p. 73).

Esperanto is more homogeneous because its laws governing the elements absorbed from other sources are stricter. What defines the heterogeneity of something assembled is not the diversity of origin of the ingredients, but some lack of harmony together with the lack of an assimilating nucleus (as everyone knows who has tried to prepare *Ú* mayonnaise).

3.Underlying anxiety

The function of the defence mechanisms is to protect the ego from anxiety. Their appearance whenever Esperanto is mentioned means that deep in the psyche the language is felt to be threatening.

(a) *Avoiding change in the status quo.* In some respects psychological resistance to Esperanto can be compared with the opposition encountered by the ideas of Christopher Columbus and Galileo: a stable, well-ordered world found itself overturned by the new theories, which deprived humanity of its millennially firm foundation. In the same way, Esperanto is seen as troublesome in a world where every people has its own language, and where this tool is passed on en masse from one's ancestors and no individual is entitled to violate it. It demonstrates that a language is not necessarily the gift of past centuries, but may result from simple convention. Taking as its

criterion of correctness not conformity with authority, but effectiveness of communication, it changes the way of interrelating: where previously there was a vertical axis, it replaces it with a horizontal axis. Thus it attacks many profound matters on which light is not accustomed to be thrown. For example, what happens to the language hierarchy because of it? Irish Gaelic, Dutch, French and English are not seen as equal in people's minds or in many official texts. If people of different languages used Esperanto to communicate with one another, this hierarchy would lose its basis.

(b) *Language as a cared value and a sign of identity.* A language is not just an external social phenomenon. It is woven into our personality. "I absorbed Catalan with my mother's milk", said one person questioned in the course of the research on which this analysis is based.

Our concepts carry an emotional charge which linguistics ignores but which is vital to our conduct. The sentimental nucleus of the concept "language" is sited in the relationship with the mother, which is presumably why many ethnic tongues speak of the family language as the "mother" tongue. Between the baby who can only express its unhappiness by crying, and often gets an unsuitable or unhelpful response, and the three-year-old infant who uses words to explain what has happened, an enormous change has taken place, which to the infant seems miraculous.

We were too young when we learned to talk to be aware that it was just an everyday learning process that was taking place. It seemed to us a kind of magical gift, a divine toy. Previously we couldn't explain anything, and here, we know not why, we find ourselves in possession of a talisman that fulfils all kinds of miracles and enriches to an unprecedented extent the thing without which life would be impossible: personal relationships.

The need to feel understood is one of a child's basic requirements. Well, without language what would remain? Parental attitudes, followed by the lengthy influence of the school, which presents the language as something unassailable and the key to all literary treasures, only strengthens the sentimental nucleus. To assert in this context that a language "made up" by someone seen as a contemporary - Esperanto is generally confused with Zamenhof's project - can function as well as one's native tongue is an insult to the latter, is to take away the status as a magical talisman that it always retains in the depths of the psyche even if at a conscious level we look on it more rationally. It is an intolerable sacrilege. It's presumably to avoid such desecration that some Esperanto speakers, by a quite understandable psychological transference, say that Zamenhof's work is by itself inexplicable and is to be attributed to inspiration from on high, superhuman.

In fact, when the psychological reactions evoked by the word "Esperanto" are examined, one can only be amazed at the number of people unable to tolerate the idea that this language could be, in some respects, better than their native tongue. This reaction comes from a tendency to equate a language with the person: my language is my people, my language is me; if my language is inferior my people is inferior, and I am inferior. By declaring Esperanto a priori worthless, and pronouncing this judgement as self-evident, one is saved. This artifice is profoundly human and perfectly understandable, but not acceptable from a scientific point of view.

(c) *Various fears.* When reactions to Esperanto are examined by means of clinical discourse, all kinds of underlying fears are revealed, which cannot be discussed in detail. I shall simply limit myself to seven:

(i) *Fear of risk.* Since no official body, no prestigious institution, has acknowledged Esperanto's value, to come out in favour of it is to adopt a stance that is distanced from the one which appears to be official. It's less risky to regurgitate what everyone else says, which seems to be in line with the attitude of those in authority and the intellectual elite.

(ii) *Fear of direct contacts.* There is something reassuring about communicating by means of translation or a language too imperfectly understood to enable a direct exchange of ideas in detail and with subtlety. Meeting, in conditions of perfectly untrammelled communication, with attitudes radically different from our own, can be a shocking and dangerously confusing experience. This fear is justified, because Esperanto exists in our midst at a level closer to spontaneous expression than other languages. A young Japanese who went round the world meeting at every stage local Esperanto speakers tells us how shocked he was by these straight dialogues with people who, just because they were being themselves and were able to say so, altered the ethnic perspective of the world-view (Deguti, 1973).

(iii) *Fear of infantile regression.* "Simple" is confused with "over-simple" or "childish", which gives rise to the notion that Esperanto cannot be used to express really adult thoughts at the highest level of abstraction. Thus the factor of "simplicity" is isolated from its complement - which totally modifies the situation - i.e. unlimited possibilities of combination. For example, the ending *_a*, which signifies an adjective in Esperanto, is much simpler than the many French suffixes fulfilling the same role, but it frequently makes exact expression possible, whereas many French nouns do not have an adjectival form, e.g. *insécurité* (English *insecure*, Esperanto *nesekura*), *fait* (English *factual*, Esperanto *fakta*), *Etats-Unis* (Spanish *estadounidense*, Esperanto *usona*, which Esperanto differentiates from *amerika kaj nordamerika*), or *pays* (besides *nacia*, "of the nation", Esperanto has *landa*, "of the country"), and so on.

(iv) *Fear of transparency.* It is imagined that Esperanto would endow thought with an intolerable clarity:

L'élément affectif si important dans le langage trouve difficilement sa place dans cette langue où tout est explicite, cette langue "plus précise que la pensée". (Burney, 1966, p. 94).

[It is difficult to see a place for the affective aspect, so important in language, in that clear language in which everything is explicit, that language "more exact than thought".]

It is in fact just as possible to be inexact in Esperanto as in any other language, even if it is often easier to speak clearly in Zamenhof's tongue.

(v) *Fear of inferiority in connection with facility.* A more complicated solution to a problem is felt to be worth more than a simple one. Choosing the difficult one satisfies some kind of wish to dominate which provides a reassuring and comforting feeling of one's own importance.

(vi) *Fear of heterogeneity*. This is a special form of the condition known classically as "fragmentation anxiety". Because it is easy for man to identify with a language, Esperanto encourages projection on to it of emotions connected with the whole of the personality. Now, this is felt at the unconscious level to be a fragile structure made up of separate self-contradictory elements continually in danger of falling apart. As a symbol of something insufficiently strong, being constructed of too disparate elements, Esperanto is frightening.

(vii) *Fear of lowering standards and destruction*. Esperanto is perceived as a road-roller whose passing squashes everything to death, flattening out all cultural differences. In this way, psychic elements belonging either to what Freud called the death-wish or to the unconscious affective nucleus called "automaton" by Charles Baudouin are projected on to Zamenhof's language. (Baudouin, 1950, pp. 225-229).

4. Conclusion: the function of psychological resistance

The reason for the emotional reactions noted at the start of this study is now becoming clearer: the person concerned is afraid. He is terrified of the idea that the sacred treasure that shines with a fairy beauty in the depths of his psyche, which nothing is allowed to surpass: the mother tongue, symbol of his identity, might be torn away or damaged. Like a bird in a room, which, panic-stricken, doesn't stop beating itself against the windowpane and doesn't see the open door nearby, he lacks the serenity necessary for a quiet look at what, after all, Esperanto is, that appears to defile the very concept of a language. He is caught up in a vicious circle: to stop being frightened he would have to look at the reality straight on, but to do that he must first stop being frightened.

This kind of reaction, illogical but typical in human psychology, doesn't happen without the intervention of political and social factors blown up and spread by the mass media, but which cannot be analysed here (I have dealt with them elsewhere, vd. Piron, 1986, pp. 22-28 and 34-36). They suggest a subliminal influence comparable with those of advertising and political propaganda, based on involuntary misinformation that has been reproducing itself automatically for a century now. There is no other way of explaining why it is that children and adolescents almost never show the a priori negative reaction easily found in adults, although all the psychological elements triggering defence mechanisms in the latter are present in the former as well.

Manipulated by his unconscious fears, twentieth-century man doesn't see that before passing judgement on Esperanto it is necessary to take cognisance of a number of facts. This may be regrettable. But from a historic point of view it can be seen that these reactions have had a positive effect. The instant general acceptance of the language embryo put together by Zamenhof would have subjected it to stresses from which it would not have emerged alive. At that stage it was too delicate, too incomplete. It needed quite a long lifetime in a limited but multicultural environment for the necessary adjustments to be brought about, for semantic areas to be defined, for weaknesses to be corrected naturally, through usage.

On the other hand, linguistic relationships are always relationships of the strong towards the weak. The idea of replacing these by egalitarian relationships affording the same status to the

smallest and weakest language as to those of the economic and cultural giants has been too shocking for humanity to be able to adjust unscathedly and quickly to it. Transformations in the general thought patterns require gradual assimilation.

From a century of challenges, of political and intellectual attacks, Esperanto has emerged remarkably strong, flexible, refined. It is characterised by a firmly stamped personality, as vigorous as French was in Rabelais' day. This fact is still denied by most people, but always *a priori*. When a writer bases himself on the examination of documents or observation of Esperanto in practical use, he acknowledges its enormous vitality. While the social and psychological resistance to Esperanto has been very strong for a long time, nowadays it seems to be more and more breathless and relinquishing its triumphant superiority. Is this not simply because it has ceased to fulfil a function?

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