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Esperanto – an East European Contact Language?

1. Introduction

The lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, incorporated into the Russian Empire, formed a multinational and multilingual cultural area in which Polish, Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Yiddish, German, Romani, and Karaim were spoken. It was the cultural environment in which Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859–1917), a Jew born in Białystok, created the international language, *международный языкъ*, that soon came to be known as Esperanto (Zamenhof 1887). In several of his autobiographical texts (e.g., in the famous “Letter to Borovko” from 1896, see Zamenhof 2006, 33), Zamenhof wrote that the hostility that the various ethnic groups of Białystok felt towards each other and especially towards the Jews was the main reason why he at an early age came to the idea of a common second language for all.

Zamenhof was not the sole Jewish language reformer from this region: his contemporary Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), born in the town of Lužki, in present-day Belarus, succeeded in reviving the Hebrew language that had not been anyone’s mother tongue for some 1700 years (Fellman 1973). But while the re-nativisation of Hebrew is an oft-mentioned success story of language planning and language policy, Esperanto, because of its artificial beginnings, is usually described as a mere linguistic curiosity. In this paper I shall try to show that early Esperanto can be fruitfully discussed as a contact language which arose partly spontaneously, and which exhibits substratal traces of its Jewish and Slavonic background.

2. Esperanto as a contact language

The main object of linguistic study is natural language, but the definition of a natural language is not always straightforward – think of pidgins, or some ar-

chaic standard languages, which certainly have human users and can be studied linguistically though they do not have native speakers (cf. Lyons 1991). Esperanto, as spoken today, possesses at least three features that show it resembles natural languages (Lindstedt 2006, 48–49):

First, the norm of Esperanto is partly non-codified, i.e., Esperanto cannot be learnt from textbooks, grammars, and dictionaries alone, but only by participating in the speech community. The concept of speech community as applied to Esperanto is discussed by Wood (1979) and Fettes (1996); cf. also Forster (1982, 347ff.).

Second, several grammatical and lexical changes during the 121-year history of Esperanto have not been due to official or unofficial language planning and codification, but have been initiated and spread by anonymous speakers, being codified only afterwards (or not at all). This spontaneous change of Esperanto has been studied by Schubert (1989), Philippe (1991) and Gledhill (2000) among others.

Third, Esperanto has acquired native or first-language speakers (Versteegh 1993; Corsetti 1996, 2004; Bergen 2001; Lindstedt 2006). My own estimate of their number is about one thousand. All of them are at least bilingual, many of them even trilingual, and all use another language more often than Esperanto in their adult lives – as is the case with many minority languages. The important point to note is that since Esperanto can be acquired as a first language, it must possess the basic characteristics of a natural language and can be studied with linguistic methods.

A contact language is a new language that has arisen as a result of a language contact situation. Contact languages include at least pidgins and creoles (Sebba 1997); often a third type, a bilingual mixed language such as Anglo-Romani or the Media Lengua of Ecuador, is included in the list (Bakker & Muysken 1995; Thomason 2001, 196–221). Pidgins and creoles come into being in contact situations where the speakers of at least two (usually three or more) languages do not share a common language to communicate with each other. Esperanto, too, can be regarded as a kind of contact language, as it is one reaction to cross-language communication problems in Europe. Of course it did not arise wholly spontaneously as normal contact languages do, but neither was its structure totally created and codified by Zamenhof or anyone else. In fact, Esperanto has

never had a grammar codifying all its rules, especially the syntax. Its speakers, including Zamenhof himself, have created and learnt the norm of the language partly unconsciously – in the process of using it. In this process they have naturally been influenced by their mother tongues and other languages they know.

In the study of the genesis of pidgins and creoles, influences of three types are usually distinguished: superstrate languages, substrate languages, and language universals (Arends, Kouwenberg & Smith 1995; Muysken & Veenstra 1995; Sebba 1997, 25–26). The superstrate language is more often called the lexifier – it is typically the colonial language which gave a pidgin or creole most of its vocabulary, though not necessarily much of its grammar. Sometimes there is more than one lexifier, such as Norwegian and Russian in Russernorsk (Broch & Jahr 1984). The substrate languages are those originally spoken by the people who were the first users of a pidgin or creole, or also “the indigenous languages with which the lexifier came into contact” (Sebba 1997, 25); notice that contrary to the traditional use of this term in historical linguistics, there is no presupposition that the substrates ever disappeared. The central research question in pidgin and creole genesis is the role of the lexifier language, substratal languages, and language universals in forming the grammar of the new contact languages.

3. West European lexifiers – East European substrates

The greater part of the lexical morphemes in Esperanto are taken from Latin and Romance languages, and the general impression it gives is definitely Romance or more generally West European:

El fruaj tempoj sentas mi reveni
Al mia vid', figuroj svagaj, vin.
Ĉu provu mi ĉifoje vin firmteni?
Ĉu restis al vi kora la inklin'?'
Vi alpremiĝas! Do, bonvolu veni
El la nebulo ĉirkaŭanta min;
Junece mia sino jam ekskuas
pro sorĉa spiro, kiu vin trafluas.
(Goethe: *Faŭsto*, transl. by Karl Schulze)

It was natural that Zamenhof chose the lexifiers of his *meždunarodnyj jazyk* in this fashion. Latin was the traditional and symbolic international language

highly valued not only by Western European scholars, but also by many intellectuals of the Orthodox countries, and the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had been the main path of Latin to East Europe. French was the *lingua franca* with the most prestige in 19th-century Europe, and Italian was considered to be especially euphonious.

Although Romance elements thus prevail in the Esperanto lexicon, it also contains many Germanic words from German and/or English. In the text above, such is the adjective *frua* ‘early’ (Gm. *früh*), and some other examples in the language are the common words *jes* ‘yes’, *nur* ‘only’, *veki* ‘to wake’, *flugi* ‘to fly’, *jaro* ‘year’, *vorto* ‘word’, *hundo* ‘dog’, *birdo* ‘bird’, *ŝultro* ‘shoulder’, *ŝtrumpo* ‘sock, stocking’, *ŝranko* ‘cupboard’, and others.¹ But there are also some Slavonic words, mainly from Russian, but in some cases also from Polish (Duc Goninaz 1991; see also Blanke 1985, 247–253):

Esperanto		Russian	Polish
<i>barakti</i>	to flounder	<i>baraxtat'sja</i>	—
<i>bulko</i>	roll	<i>bulka</i>	<i>bułka</i>
<i>ĉerpi</i>	to ladle	<i>čerpat'</i>	<i>czepać</i>
<i>ĉu</i>	(question part.)	—	<i>czy</i>
<i>gladi</i>	to iron	<i>gladit'</i>	(<i>gładzić</i>)
<i>kolbaso</i>	sausage	<i>kolbasa</i>	(<i>kielbasa</i>)
<i>krom</i>	besides	<i>krome</i>	—
<i>kruta</i>	steep	<i>krutoj</i>	—
<i>nepre</i>	absolutely	<i>nepremenno</i>	—
<i>pilko</i>	ball	—	<i>piłka</i>
<i>po</i>	(distribut. prep.)	<i>po</i>	<i>po</i>
<i>prava</i>	right, justified	<i>prav</i>	(<i>prawy</i>)
<i>ŝelko</i>	braces	—	<i>szelki</i>
<i>vosto</i>	tail	<i>xvost</i>	—

As Vilborg (1989–2001, s.v. *prava*) notes, the Slavonic *prava* was taken into the central vocabulary of Esperanto in spite of the fact that in Latin, the homonymous *pravus* has practically the opposite meaning (‘bent, crooked, bad’). In modern Esperanto, *prav-* has become a verb: ‘you are right’ is less often *vi estas prava* as in Zamenhof’s times, but usually just *vi pravas*. This is an example of language-internal development in Esperanto.

There are also several cases in which a word borrowed from the Romance languages is clearly influenced by Russian in its use and meaning. We can speak of a Slavonic substrate visible in semantics. For example, the adjective *plena* ‘full’ still means ‘complete’ in certain expressions (as Russian *polnyj* does), such as *plena vortaro* ‘complete dictionary’, though the word *kompleta* ‘complete’ entered the language early, too. The use of *facila* ‘easy’ in such metaphoric expressions as *facil-anima* ‘light-hearted’ reflects the polysemy of Russian *lëgkij* ‘light; easy’, though *facila* no longer means ‘light, not heavy’ in the concrete sense. The word *vico* does not only mean ‘turn (to do something)’, as its Latin etymon would suggest, but also ‘queue, line’; Vilborg (1989–2001, s.v. *vico*) considers this to be an arbitrary meaning extension, but it is of course based on the similar dual semantics of the Russian *očered’*.

In some other instances, Russian-based semantics is only observed in early Esperanto, because later Western influences have removed it, especially after the centre of the Esperanto movement shifted from the Russian empire to France at the beginning of the 20th century. Here we can speak of a certain “Westernisation” of Esperanto (Piron 1989) – creolists speak of “de-creolisation” when a creole approaches its prestigious lexifier. Thus, the word *okazo* originally meant both ‘occasion’ and ‘case’, as the Russian *slučaj* does, while *kazo* only meant ‘case in declension’. Owing to Western influence, *kazo* started to mean ‘case in court’, then ‘case in general’. The Esperanto *poemo* originally had the semantics of the Russian *poëma*, i.e., ‘long (epic) poem’; ‘poem in general’ was *versaĵo*, a derivative of *verso* ‘line in a poem’ (cf. Russian *stixi*, *stixotvorenje* from *stix*), but nowadays *poemo* may be just any poem. The verb ‘to resign’ was originally *rifuziĝi*, a de-transitive (anticausative) derivative of *rifuzi* ‘to refuse’; this was clearly based on the Russian pair *otkazat’* ‘to refuse’ – *otkazat’sja* ‘to resign’, but the semantic relation was opaque for Western users who soon adopted *rezigni*. In early Esperanto texts from the Russian empire, the verb *naĝi* ‘to swim’ was used not only for humans or animals, but also for boats and ships; this use, modelled on the Russian *plyt’* and *plavat’*, is no longer possible.

Esperanto has a rich and productive word-formation system, which mainly follows general European and universal patterns. However, in some parts a Slavonic substrate is clearly visible. A good example is the abstract use of the prefix *sub-* ‘under’: *sub-aŭskulti* ‘to eavesdrop’ is clearly a calque of Russian *pod-slušivat’*, and *sub-aĉeti* ‘to bribe’ is modelled upon *pod-kupit’*. The word *sen-paga* ‘free (of charge)’ has the same structure as *bes-platnyj*, and *antaŭ-vidi* ‘to

foresee, to predict' the same as *pred-videt*', though they are of course quite transparent also for non-Russian users of Esperanto.

Some less transparent derivatives have been replaced by Western words. The word *el-rigardi* 'to look like' has the structure of the Russian *vy-gljadet* 'id.', but in Modern Esperanto it means what it should mean according to its parts, viz. 'to look out (the window etc.)', and 'to look like' is expressed by the verb *aspekti*. Zamenhof expressed 'concept, notion' with the word *komprenaĵo*, a derivative of the verb *kompreni* 'to understand, to comprehend', certainly having the Russian *ponjatie* 'concept' and *ponjat* 'to understand' in mind, but now Esperanto has *koncepto*.

The Russian substrate can also be observed in the syntax of the 19th-century texts. Zamenhof occasionally used the reflexive pronoun *si*, accusative *sin*, in all the persons in a Slavonic fashion, as in *mi lavas sin* 'I wash myself', but soon *mi lavas min* became the norm and *si* was restricted to the third person. Typical of his style was also the use of *nome* 'namely' after the interrogative pronoun at least in indirect questions, as in . . . *antaŭvidi kun plena precizeco kaj plena certeco, kia nome lingvo estos iam internacia* . . . 'to predict with full precision and full certainty what kind of a language will some time be international' (Zamenhof 1991 [1900], 346). It is easy to see here the model of the Russian *imenno* (*kakoj imenno jazyk* 'precisely what language').

Perhaps the most deep-seated Slavonic feature in the syntax of Esperanto is the tendency of the adverbs of manner to be placed before the main verb, as in *mi tre bone scias tion* 'I know it very well'. On the other hand, Zamenhof consciously excluded the Slavonic-style double negation from Esperanto.

It has often been pointed out that the phoneme inventory of Esperanto is similar to that in some Slavonic languages – excluding palatalised consonants, though – but in this respect Esperanto is also very close to Yiddish. The influence of Yiddish, which can also be observed in some other parts of the language (Piron 1984), is a very interesting part of the East European substrate of Esperanto, since Yiddish was certainly a low-prestige language. Before Zamenhof published Esperanto, he intended to standardise Yiddish (or, as he called it, *novoevrejskij jazyk, žargon*); his grammar, written around 1880, was only preserved as a manuscript and published a century later (Zamenhof 1982; for the dating, see Maimon 1978, 71–73). Two Esperanto words must be mentioned in this

connection. The first is *lerno-libro* ‘textbook’, literally “learning-book”; German has *Lehrbuch* “teaching-book”, but Yiddish has *lernbukh* precisely as Esperanto. Another is *super-jaro* ‘leap year’, lit. “over-year”, whose model must be the Yiddish *iberyor* (cf. German *Schaltjahr*).

German words with a diphthong written *-ei-* seem to have entered Esperanto in two fashions: sometimes Esperanto has *-ej-*, which seems to reflect the German spelling, and sometimes *-aj-*, which is closer to the standard German pronunciation. However, it has now been established that the distinction corresponds to a real difference in the pronunciation of Yiddish (Kiselman 1992):

Esperanto		Yiddish	German
<i>hejmo</i>	home	<i>heym</i>	<i>Heim</i>
<i>hejti</i>	to heat	<i>heytsn</i>	<i>heizen</i>
<i>fajfi</i>	to whistle	<i>fayfn</i>	<i>pfeifen</i>
<i>fajli</i>	to file	<i>fayln</i>	<i>feilen</i>
<i>ŝajni</i>	to seem	<i>shaynen</i>	<i>scheinen</i>

German dialects exist in which the distinction is preserved to this day, but for Zamenhof, Yiddish was the most obvious model here, though we do not know whether he adopted the Yiddish distribution of diphthongs consciously.

In all, there are plenty of Slavonic and even Yiddish substratal features in Esperanto. Some of them, though by no means all, have later been superseded by Western influences. There are also instances where the original Slavonic feature has changed not so much owing to Westernisation, as to spontaneous language-internal tendencies. Such is the case of the new verb *pravi* ‘to be right’ mentioned above: it was taken from Russian (with the support of Polish) as an adjective, but its use as a verb does not have a model in the Slavonic languages. Another example could be the Russian verb *xlopotát*’ and its Polish counterpart *kłopotac’ się*: the verb was taken into Esperanto as *klopodi* ‘to take steps, to take pains’, but its meaning has now shifted towards ‘to attempt, to try’ and it has consequently come to be used with a following infinitive: *mi klopodis veki ŝin* ‘I tried to wake her’.

An even clearer case of language-internal evolution would be the Esperanto verb *ŝati* which originally meant ‘to prize, to value’. The German *schätzen* is usually mentioned as its etymon, but the Yiddish *shatsn* comes phonetically nearer. In

modern Esperanto *ŝati* means simply ‘to like’, as in *mi ŝatas glaciaĵon* ‘I like ice cream’ or *mi ŝatas naĝi* ‘I like to swim’. The need to delimit the meaning of *ami* which used to mean both ‘to like’ and ‘to love’ (as Russian *ljubit’* or French *aimer*) has caused the semantic shift of *ŝati* – which, in its turn, has necessitated the adoption of a new verb for ‘to value’ (currently *aprezi* and *apreci* are competing for this place).

4. Conclusion: Esperanto’s Jewish and East European roots

In a letter written in Esperanto to the Frenchman Alfred Michaux in 1905, Zamenhof described the influence of his Jewish background as follows:

Were I not a Jew from the ghetto, the idea of the unification of humankind either never would have occurred to me, or it would not have held me in its grip so obstinately during all my life. Nobody can feel the misery of the disunity of humankind so strongly as a Jew from the ghetto. The necessity of a language that is not national, but neutrally human cannot be felt so strongly by anyone but a Jew, who has to pray to God in a language that has been dead for a long time, who receives his education and instruction in the language of a people that rejects him, and who has fellow sufferers all over the world, but cannot communicate with them (Zamenhof 1948, I, 107; my transl.).²

The idea of a common second language for all people occurred to Zamenhof as a result of his experience as a discriminated Jew in the multinational and multilingual East Europe of his time. In his cultural environment, he also had models for languages that were sociolinguistically different from the national standard languages: Yiddish, which had low prestige, but was nevertheless the unifying language of the Ashkenazi Jews, and Hebrew, which was a common prestige language without native speakers, similar to Latin among the Polish and Lithuanian Catholics. Zamenhof first tried to standardise Yiddish (it seems that he did not believe in the revival of the Hebrew, see Maimon 1978, 83–84), but then turned to a larger idea of a neutral international language that would serve not only the Jews, but also other ethnic groups.

The lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were in the 19th century a multilingual area which did not give rise to any pidgins and creoles because Russian was the established lingua franca, and because those needing to learn other languages besides their own usually had sufficient access to them.

Nevertheless, I hope I have shown that early Esperanto can be fruitfully studied as an East European contact language with Romance lexifiers and Slavonic and Yiddish substrates. Although created through conscious language planning, Esperanto as used by the first Esperantists in the Russian empire was subject to different unconscious influences and spontaneous language-internal developments that were not unlike those observed in other, better-known language contact situations.

¹ The Esperanto noun marker *-o* added to a Germanic root may give an odd impression, but actually Zamenhof did not here invent anything that a natural language could not do in a contact situation. Dervišić (2008, 16), describing Spanish spoken by immigrants in Sweden, reports the sentence *Quieres comer korvo?* ‘do you want to eat sausage?’, where the Swedish *korv* ‘sausage’ accepts the Spanish masculine ending *-o*. And Finnish has for centuries added *-i* to foreign nouns ending in a consonant, such as Swedish *post* > Finnish *posti* ‘post, mail’ and Swedish *bank* > Finnish *pankki* ‘bank’.

² “Se mi ne estus hebreo el la ghetto, la ideo pri la unuigo de la homaro aŭ tute ne venus al mi en la kapon, aŭ ĝi neniam tenus min tiel obstine en la daŭro de mia tuta vivo. La malfeliĉon de la homara disiĝo neniŭ povas senti tiel forte, kiel hebreo el la ghetto. La neceseco de lingvo sennacia, neŭtrale *homa* neniŭ povas senti tiel forte kiel hebreo, kiu estas devigata preĝi al Dio en jam longe mortinta lingvo, ricevas sian edukadon kaj instruadon en lingvo de popolo, kiu lin forpuŝas, havas samsuferanojn en la tuta mondo kaj ne povas kun ili kompreniĝadi.”

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