**Jouko Lindstedt**

# Native Esperanto as a Test Case for Natural Language

## Abstract

Esperanto has some properties of a natural language, including about 1,000 first-language speakers. In studies of the speech of Esperanto-speaking children it is difficult to find convincing examples of changes introduced by the process of nativisation. All examples proposed seem rather to be due to (1) transfers from the children's other native languages, (2) differences between the spoken and written register of Esperanto and, in some cases, (3) incomplete acquisition. Consequently, it would appear that Esperanto has already been adjusted to the requirements of language universals or Universal Grammar in the process of being used by non-native speakers, which is why native speakers need not introduce immediate changes into it.

## 1. Introduction

In his textbook *Yleinen kielitiede* ('General Linguistics', 1994), Professor Fred Karlsson discusses the distinction between natural and artificial languages, and writes about so-called artificial auxiliary languages as follows: "A more successful type [of auxiliary language] is based on natural languages, usually on Latin and other important Indo-European languages. The words are based on these languages, the grammar has been made as simple as possible". Karlsson points out that after the creation of Esperanto in 1887, millions of people have taken an interest in it. "There are even people whose first language is Esperanto because their parents were Esperantists. This fact makes Esperanto almost equal to a natural language" (p. 3–4, my translation). Although Karlsson's estimate of the

number of Esperantists may be too high,[1] his basic observation is correct: since Esperanto has first-language speakers, it must in some way or another resemble natural languages despite its artificial origins.

In order to understand such a complex phenomenon as natural language, we need to study not only its clearest and most prototypical instances, but also various borderline cases. This is one of the reasons why Esperanto is of interest to general linguistics.

## 2.  Properties of natural language in Esperanto

Present-day Esperanto has at least three properties that make it similar to a natural language:

*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). Comrie (1996) even asserts that the norm of Esperanto depends more on its speech community than the norm of English does. However, this claim requires qualification, since the norm of English still depends mainly on its community of native speakers, whereas the vast majority of the speech community of Esperanto consists of non-native speakers.

*Second,* several grammatical and lexical changes during the nearly 120-year long 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).[2] This spontaneous change of Esperanto has been studied by Schubert (1989), Philippe (1991) and Gledhill (2000), among others.

*Third,* Esperanto has native or first-language speakers. The earliest report of this aspect of Esperanto seems to be that of Butler (1921), and a good overview can be found in Corsetti (1996a). My own estimate of their number, based on my personal participation in different meetings and networks of Esperanto-speaking families, is about one thousand. All native

---

[1] My own estimate is that the number of those who can really *speak* Esperanto is 100,000 with an error margin of half an order of magnitude, i.e., between ca. 30,000 and 300,000.

[2] The fact that Esperanto changes spontaneously is, of course, one of the reasons why its norm is partly non-codified.

speakers of Esperanto are at least bilingual, many of them even trilingual, and practically all of them use another language more often than Esperanto in their adult lives. But there are languages, such as Finnish Romani, that are in a similar position but are nevertheless investigated as natural languages.

Taken together, these three properties indicate that Esperanto is clearly approaching the status of a natural language, similarly to pidgins that are being creolised (cf. Corsetti 1994, 1996b). Of course the term "natural language" itself is not unproblematic, because all human languages are social conventions, not biological phenomena—what is biologically determined is only the child's general capacity to learn one or several of these social languages. Lyons (1991: 46–72) distinguishes four different senses of the term "natural" in linguistics, but does not find any definition of it that would suffice to distinguish Esperanto from, say, English (p. 69). Yet for many linguists the term "natural" has a relatively well-established and well-defined meaning: a natural language is one that has native speakers. In sociolinguistics, native speakers constitute the basis of the speech community of every language; in psycholinguistics and Chomsky-inspired general linguistics, the proof of the naturalness of a language is that it is acquired as a first language in early childhood.

In principle we can distinguish between a *possible* natural language that *could* be acquired as a first language, and an *actual* natural language that is actually spoken by native speakers (and has certain properties by virtue of this fact). Although an infinite set of possible natural languages must exist, it is often assumed that we do not yet know all of the defining properties of this set. Indeed, according to many, the main task of linguistics is to discover them. This would mean that L. L. Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto, may have created a language, but it was not a ready-made, natural language: if children now acquire Esperanto as a first language, they must, according to this line of thought, change it in some way or another, as happens in the nativisation and creolisation of pidgins and new sign languages.

## 3. Processes of change in native Esperanto

Two recent studies have shown how native Esperanto might differ from the Esperanto of non-native speakers. Corsetti (2004) has collected beautiful instances of overgeneralisation and creative use of Esperanto by children.

This kind of overgeneralisation is not principally different from what happens in the process of acquiring other languages. Bergen (2001) makes explicit claims about changes in the grammatical structure of Esperanto. I will compare his material with my own notes on the language of my three children, whom I have always addressed in Esperanto. I have also had access to Ian Fantom's notes on the linguistic development of his three children, who are second-generation native speakers of Esperanto on their mother's side.

Bergen discusses five differences between what he calls Standard Esperanto and Native Esperanto. In the latter he has observed "the attrition of the tense/aspect system and of the accusative, the fixing of SVO word order, the irregularity of lexical stress, and the tendency for phonological reduction, especially of pronouns and certain verbal morphology" (p. 594). His results are based on a survey of the speech of eight children, aged 6 to 14 years, at a meeting of Esperanto-speaking children in 1998. The children had six different adstrate languages, that is to say, languages that were native to them besides Esperanto: Croatian, French, Hebrew, Russian, Slovak and Swiss German.

Some of Bergen's findings are convincing, but not necessarily typical of native speakers only: morphologically conditioned phonological reduction may certainly be observed in the speech of fluent non-native speakers as well. Bergen's conclusion that the tense-aspect system of Esperanto is undergoing attrition rests on the lack of certain complex verb forms in the children's speech. However, this may simply be a difference between spoken and written language, or between child and adult language, rather than between native and non-native language. It should be kept in mind that nobody can receive their formal schooling in Esperanto, and I have met even adult native speakers of Esperanto who are not at all accustomed to reading or writing it.

The lack of the accusative ending *-n* in much of the children's speech would seem to be a better candidate for a change due to the nativisation process, but of course some of the adstrate languages in Bergen's sample do not possess such a case marker, either. According to Bergen, "there seems to be retention of the accusative only where the N[ative] E[speranto] speaker's adstrate dictates such retention. And even in these cases, it is not used consistently" (p. 588). Although Bergen takes interference from the children's other native languages into account, here he seems to be constructing a case similar to the celebrated nativisation of the Nicaraguan Sign Language by the first generation of native signers (Pinker 1995: 36ff.

presents this and some other instances of sign-language nativisation). According to Bergen, the children who are nativising Esperanto are making a kind of creoloid with a fixed SVO order and an optional or missing morphological marking of the direct object. In his opinion, the role of the adstrate languages is only to retard this natural change.

However, my notes contain practically no cases of missing accusatives in my own children's Esperanto after the two-word stage of their early syntax. I have even noted their correcting of the accusative errors of non-native speakers. Finnish certainly supports direct object marking in some sentence patterns (and one of the markers happens to be *-n,* as in Esperanto), but there are important sentence patterns in Finnish (such as imperative sentences and impersonal passives) where the object is left unmarked. If Bergen's theory were right, there should be at least sporadic missing accusatives in my children's speech. And in Ian Fantom's notes on his first child (GF), whose Esperanto was initially stronger than his English, the accusative ending is not only retained, but it is sometimes even used as a free morpheme.

Additional problems are that there are no monolingual native speakers of Esperanto, and the very concept of native or first-language speaker is relative. It is difficult to distinguish between changes due to the nativisation process, perhaps involving some kind of Universal Grammar, and changes that are simply due to incomplete acquisition. The mother of Bergen's French subject (personal communication) told me that at the time when Bergen collected his material her child used Esperanto reluctantly and seldom.

Bergen does not discuss non-standard double negation in his subjects' speech, but at least two of my three children have made regular use of it. In the language of the eldest (LB) I noted at the age of 3;8: *Tio ne ettat nenio* 'It is nothing' (literally 'It isn't nothing'), instead of the standard *Tio estas nenio* or *Tio ne estas io,* and at the age of 3;11: *Vi ne gajnot neniam* 'You will never win' (literally 'You won't win never') instead of the standard *Vi gajnos neniam* or *Vi ne gajnos iam.* Some linguists I have discussed this with are inclined to think this might be a good example of a nativisation change, the more so as there is no double negation in Finnish, but it is typical of Creole languages. (The child in question did not become aware of the proper meaning of her double-negation sentences, i.e., 'It must be something', 'You must win sometimes', before the age of 10 years.)

Yet, even this case seems to be interference after all. I have not come across double negation in the speech of any other Esperanto-speaking

children whose adstrate languages do not have this feature. The point is that in Finnish, the negation, though not double, is in a way "one-and-a-half" negation: the main negative element (which is grammatically a verb) requires that certain pronouns and pronominal adverbs appear as negative polarity items (partly similar to the English *anything, anybody, anywhere, ever* etc.). There are thus no real Finnish equivalents to the Esperanto constructions *Tio ne estas io* ('It isn't anything', lit. 'It isn't something'), *Vi ne gajnos iam* ('You won't win ever', lit. 'You won't win some time'). On the other hand, real negative pronouns and pronominal adverbs similar to the Esperanto *nenio* 'nothing' or *neniam* 'never' do not exist in Finnish, either. This is why my children used a double negation in Esperanto in an attempt to copy the Finnish construction. Additional evidence for this interpretation comes from the fact that double negation is also attested in Norwegian dialects that have a Finnish substrate (this feature has been studied by Hilde Sollid; for a concise report, see Wynn 2003). Thus, even this candidate for a change triggered by nativisation must be abandoned.

To sum up, no convincing cases of changes due to the nativisation of Esperanto have been found so far; the cases presented seem rather to be results of (1) transfers from the children's other native languages, (2) differences between the spoken and written registers of Esperanto and, in some cases, (3) incomplete acquisition. Of course a real community of native speakers would probably soon change the language in some way or another, but this would only prove that there is internal drift in all language communities—there are spontaneous grammatical and lexical changes even in the present-day non-native community of Esperanto speakers.

## 3.  Discussion

Available evidence suggests that Esperanto can be normally acquired as a first language, though its creator could not have known any modern theories of UG (Universal Grammar). There can be various explanations for this. First, it might be the case that a biologically determined UG or a bioprogram (for the latter, see Bickerton 1981) simply does not exist. Another possibility is that, as Zamenhof based his creation on existing languages, he automatically copied the basic properties of UG from these into the grammar of Esperanto; this would mean that UG does not consist of such abstract principles as claimed in Chomsky-inspired linguistics, but

rather of fairly transparent surface features one can observe by generalising from school grammars of different languages.

There is yet a third possibility, and it seems the best hypothesis to me. It is important to notice that the grammar of Esperanto has *never* been completely described and codified, not even when Zamenhof was still the only person writing in the language. To take an obvious example: the proverbial sixteen rules of Esperanto grammar, first presented in Zamenhof (1887) and declared unalterable in the basic normative work on the language, Zamenhof (1905), do not say anything about word order in simple or complex sentences. Yet it has always been clear that Esperanto is a SVO language with a relative free order of the main constituents; that it has NPs, VPs, PPs; that most specifiers stand on the left of their heads and most complements on the right; and so on. This is so because from the very beginning, the use of Esperanto has been learnt by reading actual texts and hearing actual utterances, first those by Zamenhof, but very soon thereafter by other writers and speakers as well. Thus, it is by actual use that Esperanto has been adjusted to UG: even though the speakers of the language have been mostly non-native, they have not introduced anything into it that a natural language could not contain.

A more difficult question is whether the speakers of Esperanto have made this second language of theirs structurally natural by transferring properties of their first languages to it, or whether they have applied some innate universal properties of their language faculty. This is of course reminiscent of the "substratist" vs. "universalist" explanations in the study of creole genesis (see Part II in Arends & al. (eds.) 1995), and, as in pidgin and creole linguistics, the right answer is probably a complex answer.[3]

Creolisation is not the sole parallel for the nativisation of Esperanto. As pointed out by Versteegh (1993), it can be fruitfully compared with the revitalisation of Hebrew at about the same time as Esperanto was born. Both cases have to do with an educational decision made by parents with an extremely high linguistic awareness. When the first native speaker of Modern Hebrew was born in 1882, his situation was in no way different from the situation of those children acquiring Esperanto whose parents are not native speakers themselves: the little Ben-Zion Ben Yehuda could not

---

[3] Even a kind of "superstrate" can be observed in Esperanto, given that French and other West European languages often serve as prestigious models even for those speakers to whom they are not native, but this influence can probably be discarded outside the lexicon.

benefit from the fact that Hebrew had had native speakers for one and a half millennia earlier. The description by Fellman (1973: 37–40) of the first Hebrew-speaking household of the modern age shows that the parents were at a considerable disadvantage as compared with modern Esperanto-speaking parents as regards the existence of names for everyday objects, or the availability of children's books. But a more exiting and controversial question is where the grammar of Modern Hebrew, or native Esperanto for that matter, came from.

## References

Arends, Jacques & Pieter Muysken & Norval Smith (eds.) (1995) *Pidgins and Creoles: An introduction*. Creole Language Library 15. Amsterdam & Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Bergen, Benjamin K. (2001) Nativization processes in L1 Esperanto. *Journal of Child Language* 28: 575–595.

Bickerton, Derek (1981) *Roots of language*. Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma.

Butler, M.C. (1921) Infana Esperanto. *Literaturo* 12, October–December 1921. Cited in Corsetti 1996a.

Comrie, Bernard (1996) Natural and artificial international languages: A typo[l]ogist's assessment. *Journal of Universal Language* 3: 35–55.

Corsetti, Renato (1994) Andrea diras "ti-ta". Disaj observoj pri la kreoliĝo de Esperanto. *Esperanto* 87.4: 63–64.

—— (1996a) A mother tongue spoken mainly by fathers. *Language Problems and Language Planning* 20: 263–273.

—— (1996b) Esperanto kaj kreolaj lingvoj: komunaj kaj malkomunaj trajtoj en la kreoliĝo. In Stanislav Košecký (ed.) *Multkulturaj familioj de nuntempa Eŭropo. Aktoj de la seminario okazinta 01–02.08.1996*, pp. 11-36. Bratislavo: Esprima. Includes also an English summary: "Esperanto and Creole languages: common and different characteristics in the process of creolisation."

—— (2004) Regularizing the regular: The phenomenon of overregularization in Esperanto-speaking children. *Language Problems and Language Planning* 28: 261–282.

Fellman, Jack (1973) *The Revival of a Classical Tongue: Eliezer Ben Yehuda and the Modern Hebrew Language*. Contributions to the Sociology of Language 6. The Hague & Paris: Mouton.

Fettes, Mark (1996) The Esperanto community: A quasi-ethnic linguistic minority? *Language Problems and Language Planning* 20: 53–59.

Forster, Peter G. (1982) *The Esperanto Movement*. Contributions to the Sociology of Language 32. The Hague, Paris & New York, NY: Mouton.

Gledhill, Christopher (2000) *The Grammar of Esperanto: A corpus-based description*. 2nd, enlarged edition. München: Lincom Europa. 1st edition 1998.

Karlsson, Fred (1994) *Yleinen kielitiede*. Helsinki: Yliopistopaino.

Lyons, John (1991) *Natural Language and Universal Grammar*. Essays in Linguistic Theory 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Philippe, Benoît (1991) *Sprachwandel bei einer Plansprache am Beispiel des Esperanto*. Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre. Dissertation, Universität Konstanz.

Pinker, Steven (1995) [1994] *The Language Instinct*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial. First published in 1994 by W. Morrow and Co.

Schubert, Klaus (1989) An unplanned development in planned languages: A study of word grammar. In Klaus Schubert (ed.) *Interlinguistics: Aspects of the science of planned languages*, pp. 249–274. Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 42. Berlin & New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter.

Versteegh, Kees (1993) Esperanto as a first language: language acquisition with a restricted input. *Linguistics* 31: 539–555.

Wood, Richard (1979) A voluntary, non-ethnic, non-territorial speech community. In W. F. Mackey & Jacob Ornstein (eds.) *Sociolinguistic Studies in Language Contact: Methods and cases*, pp. 433–450. Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 6. The Hague & New York, NY: Mouton.

Wynn, Aase (2003) Kvenske spor i nordnorsk dialekt. URL: http://www.forskning.no/Artikler/2003/oktober/1065175948.1 (accessed 24 Nov, 2005)

Zamenhof, L. L. ["Dr Èsperanto"] (1887) *Meždunarodnyj jazyk. Predislovie i polnyj učebnik.* Varšava: Tipo-Litografija X. Kel'tera. (See also pp. 7–41 in *iam kompletigota plena verkaro de l. l. zamenhof*, volume 1. Kioto: ludovikito, 1973.)

Zamenhof, L. L. (1905) *Fundamento de Esperanto*. 9th edition, edited by A. Albault. Marmande: Esperantaj Francaj Eldonoj, 1963. 1st edition: Paris: Hachette, 1905.

## Unpublished Sources

Ian Fantom's notes of his children's linguistic development. Children: GF, born in 1979; RF, born in 1980; PF, born in 1983.

My own notes and recordings of my children's linguistic development. Children: LB, born in 1994; SB, born in 1997; ZB, born in 2000.

Contact information:

Jouko Lindstedt
Department of Slavonic and
        Baltic Languages and Literatures
P.O. Box 24
FI-00014 University of Helsinki
jouko(dot) lindstedt (at) helsinki (dot) fi
http://www.helsinki.fi/~jslindst/