

# The metacommunicative ideology of Esperanto

Evidence from Japan and Korea\*

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The issue of whether a particular humanistic ideology is immanent in Esperanto has been a topic of controversy since the early days of the movement. The question is explored here on the basis of evidence drawn from discussions in Esperanto between Japanese and Koreans about reconciliation between their respective countries. It is concluded that, while the convictions of the language's initiator are not universally shared among Esperanto speakers, one may legitimately speak of a common metacommunicative ideology which valorises dialogue among ordinary people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

There have been many documented cases of the use of Esperanto for intercultural communication and reconciliation between Japan and other East Asian countries, particularly Korea. Recent efforts by Esperantists for reconciliation between Japan and Korea<sup>1</sup> include three activities, which I mention here as examples (for striking cases from the pre-1945 period, see Lee et al. 2001: 161ff.).

First, the Joint Seminar. Since 1982, an annual Japanese-Korean youth summer event, called *Komuna Seminario* (joint seminar), has been held by turns in Japan and Korea. As of 1995 China has been included, so that since then the seminar is held every year in one of the three countries in rotation. For 2002 the twentieth such event was held in Tiba (Chiba), Japan, in the first three days of August.

Secondly, in 1993 an Esperanto Group for Common Textbooks on History was founded in Japan. As the initiator Nisio Tutomu wrote at the initial stage of the project, "our group aims to prepare concise histories on our own country,

on the relationship with other countries and, in the distant future, a world history, through cooperation of Esperantists in the countries concerned” (Nisio 1994). As its first step the group began to engage with the history of relations between Japan and its nearest neighbor, Korea. The group gradually grew to include Esperantists from Korea and other countries.

The first notable result of this international cooperation was the translation into Esperanto and publication of a book on the history of Japanese-Korean relations, *Historio de Japanio kaj Koreio: Enkonduko* (History of Japan and Korea: An Introduction), written originally in Japanese by Kuboi Norio (1995). Using this book as a base of discussion, there followed three symposia as well as numerous theme sessions at Esperanto congresses in Japan and Korea. These meetings aimed to contribute to “co-creating a common understanding about the history of the relations, through discussions in Esperanto,” as the invitation to the second symposium states. This project later went on to include other East Asian countries such as China and Vietnam, but the main fruit remains the initial activities between Japan and Korea.

A third form of cooperation has been local exchanges. In recent years a close relationship, including annual visits between Esperantists in Kanazawa (in Japan) and Korean Esperantists has developed, drawing motivation from the geographical proximity of this region to Korea.

We have noted three different types of activities, youth, theme-oriented and local, seeking to reconcile the two nations often called “near but distant neighbors.” The question I will explore in this article is whether these efforts or the ideas lying behind them are related to the Esperanto language itself, or whether Esperanto is simply used here as a means of communication by those people who have intercultural understanding and reconciliation as a goal. In other words, can Esperanto be regarded in any specific sense as a “language for reconciliation,” and if so, in what sense?

There are two opposite viewpoints to this question among those interested or engaged in the Esperanto movement. On one side there are people who argue that there is a humanistic ideal inherent in the Esperanto language, called the *interna ideo* (internal idea).<sup>2</sup> This term was coined by the initiator of Esperanto, Lazar Ludwik Zamenhof. On the other side there are those who oppose the view of an inherent “idea” in the language. They maintain that it is not the language that has an “idea,” but the people who use it, claiming that the language (like any other language) can be used for any purpose (Janton 1994: 38ff., 130; see, for example, Kobayashi 1995).

By recalling the controversies in the early days of the Esperanto movement about the essence of the movement, as well as examining the discussions during recent Japanese-Korean meetings using Esperanto, I will put forward the argument that not only the former view, which seems to suggest that the use of Esperanto automatically brings peace and brother/sisterhood with it, but also the latter view, which sees language only as a neutral means (“tool”) of communication, are overly simplistic perceptions of language which fail to capture the (socio)linguistic reality.

### Is there an “internal idea” in Esperanto? The controversy in the early days

In thinking about the “internal idea” of Esperanto, let us first look at the original aims of proposing a planned international language and at the controversy which arose among the first supporters of the language concerning the essence of *Esperantismo* (Esperantism). As Janton (1993:28) points out, the ultimate goal of Zamenhof, the initiator of Esperanto, was the reconciliation of humankind. Zamenhof, in his famous letter to Borovko (c. 1895, published in 1896), writes about the origin of Esperanto in Białystok, situated then in the Russian empire, now in Poland, as follows:

The place where I was born and spent my childhood gave the direction to all my future endeavors. In Białystok, the population consisted of four diverse elements: Russian, Poles, Germans and Jews; each spoke a different language and was hostile to the other elements. (...) I was taught that all men were brothers, and meanwhile, in the street, in the square, everything at every step made me feel that men did not exist, only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews and so on. This was always a great torment to my infant mind, although many people may smile at such an “anguish for the world” in a child. Since, at that time, it seemed to me that the grown-ups were omnipotent, I kept telling myself that, when I was grown up, I would certainly destroy this evil. (Janton 1993:25)

Eventually Zamenhof summed up these thoughts concerning the reconciliation of humankind under the notion of *homaranismo*, which was conceived as a quasi-religious philosophy to unite all different peoples under a shared identity as *homaranoj* (members of the human race; approximate English equivalents might be “humanitans” and “humanitarianism”).<sup>3</sup> He wrote in a letter to an Esperantist that his plan “involves the creation of a moral bridge by which to unify in brotherhood all peoples and religions, without creating any newly formulated dogmas and without the need for any people to throw out their

traditional religions” (Letter to Alfred Michaux, Janton 1993:30–31). Zamenhof’s project, though, was not accepted by leading Esperantists, to whom a neutral bridge-language seemed quite rational, but a “neutrally human” bridge-religion in coexistence with all existing religions, which Zamenhof wanted to establish, too naïve and utopian. They sought to save the Esperanto movement from ridicule because of the author’s idealism. They achieved their aims in the *Deklaracio pri la esenco de la Esperantismo* (Declaration on the Essence of Esperantism), which was adopted in 1905 at the First World Congress of Esperanto in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. The declaration stated:

Esperantism is an effort to disseminate throughout the world the use of a neutrally human language.... All other ideas or aspirations which the individual Esperantist may attach to Esperantism are purely private matters, for which Esperantism is not responsible. (Janton 1993:33)

Probably in reaction to this tendency to distance the language from all ideologies, including that of its initiator, Zamenhof formed the notion of an “internal idea” of Esperanto. In his speech at the Second World Congress of Esperanto in Geneva, 1906, Zamenhof basically accepted the “Declaration of Boulogne” adopted a year before.<sup>4</sup> But in the same speech he argued that “for our efforts to be fruitful, above all we have to clarify the internal idea of Esperantism to ourselves” — the idea “that an international language contains in itself,” as he put it, “brotherhood and justice among all peoples.” He claimed that this idea had always accompanied Esperanto “from its birth until now” and emphasised that with an Esperanto that moved away from this idea “we want nothing in common!”

It was, however, at the same congress that a Declaration on the Neutrality of Esperanto Congresses (*Deklaracio pri la neŭtraleco de Esperanto-kongresoj*) was adopted, which once again sought to distance Esperanto from any ideology. The declaration states that programs of Esperanto congresses “must not allow the discussion of political, religious and social questions in general meetings; these issues have to be discussed only in private meetings” (Janton 1993:34).

### **Examining Japanese-Korean dialogue: Differences regarding Zamenhof’s “internal idea”**

We have looked at the controversy about the “internal idea” of Esperanto in the early days of the Esperanto movement. Whereas Zamenhof linked Esperanto

to the ideal of brotherhood and justice on the grounds of our identity as human beings, others wanted to see Esperanto as a neutral language not tied to specific ideologies or philosophies, including Zamenhof's *homaranismo*. How has the Esperanto movement developed since then? Can the "internal idea," which Zamenhof claimed to have accompanied the language from the beginning (or more exactly, to have preceded the language), be confirmed to have characterised the movement since that time as well, or did Esperanto turn out to be a language which could be used for all purposes, as the proponents of the Boulogne Declaration wished to assert? As a test case we can examine the Japanese-Korean dialogue using Esperanto, concentrating on dialogues on history, particularly in the first two symposia, at which the present author made notes.

The initiator of the Esperanto Group for Common Textbooks on History clearly shows that he follows the Zamenhofian tradition when he mentions as the goal of the activity the achievement of a historical viewpoint which "Esperantists-humanitans could adopt as their own" (*esperantistoj-homaranoj povus alpreni*) (Kuboi 1995: A-36). But even at the first symposium (Seoul, 1996) in which 32 discussants (12 from Japan and 20 from Korea) participated, differences among the participants' positions emerged. The symposium began with the report of a Korean participant on the question of which country owned the island of Tokto/Takesima, over which both Japan and Korea assert their sovereignty. The presenter argued that the island was linguistically, historically, geographically and physically part of Korea. In the ensuing discussion another Korean participant tried to turn the conversation to the question of how Esperantists should react to this problem. His proposal was supported by a Japanese discussant who argued that the problem could be solved by the idea of *sennaciismo* (non-national thinking), or, as Zamenhof put it, the notion that every land should belong to the inhabitants regardless of nationality. But the presenter rejected this view, asserting that Esperantism should not be involved here, since Esperanto was simply the language being used and not a solution to historical problems.

Similar divergences could be observed in other parts of the symposium. For example, on the prejudices between the two nations, a Korean presenter who spoke about the situation of "foreigners" in Japan (the largest part of them Koreans) began by declaring that he would speak as a human being and not as a Korean (*kiel homo ne kiel koreo*) and ended with an appeal to Esperantists to "use Esperantism to fight against the general tendency to dislike people who are different." In sharp contrast to such an attempt to speak from a non-national

position, another Korean speaker confessed that he himself had prejudices about Japan. He made clear that “I don’t have a good image of Japan” (*Mi ne havas bonan senton pri Japanio*). In his report, giving examples of traditions in both countries, he claimed the superiority of Korean culture over Japanese.

This kind of discrepancy was seen also at the second symposium (Kobe, 1997), this time primarily among Japanese participants (23, with 7 from Korea). A Japanese reporter, for example, criticised the nationalism of the emerging Japanese “Association to Make New Textbooks on History” from the viewpoint of *malnaciismo* (counter-nationalism), which he defined as the way of transnational thinking, citing Zamenhof’s words “not Russians and Poles, but human beings and human beings” (*ne rusoj kaj poloj, sed homoj kaj homoj*). His arguments were opposed by another Japanese participant who turned out to be a member of the very association that had just been criticised and who emphasised the necessity of national pride.

These examples from the discussions are sufficient to demonstrate that the participants did not share a common agreed-upon position. The official report of the symposium documents the heatedness of the discussion (Terajima 1998). On the one hand, the Zamenhofian ideal of the priority of humankind over national or ethnic differences did indeed constitute a striking feature of the arguments raised. Not only did the meetings use Esperanto as a common language, but the philosophy of its initiator proved to be a strong source of inspiration. On the other hand, one could hardly claim that Zamenhof’s ideal united all the participants in a common concept of reconciliation. The emphasis given to nationality and nationalism seemed to vary among participants.

### **Reexamining the Japanese-Korean case: Basic consensus beyond differences**

Can we now conclude from this case study that Esperanto is not necessarily related to an “internal idea” and can be used for any purpose, including also the aim of reconciliation among various purposes? Do the participants share nothing more than a common language? If we look beyond the differences expressed in the discussion and turn to other aspects of the debate, some common positions shared by virtually all the participants can be detected.

First of all, there is the implicit reality that every participant agreed to use the planned international language as a common language. This linguistic choice is explicitly mentioned in the report on the two symposia:

It has to be mentioned that the working language is not the stronger language from the countries concerned, but Esperanto, a neutral language for both peoples, a factor that differentiates this case from similar attempts by specialists on history. For example, the German language was used between German and Polish historians in the movement to improve their history textbooks. (Terajima 1998: 2)

Whereas the neutrality of the pragmatic use of English in the Japanese-Korean relationship is a kind of happy political-economic accident, the language choice of Esperantists in these activities stems from a conscious policy to avoid the linguistic hegemony of certain “native speakers.”

But this linguistic choice is not all that unites the participants. There seems to be a strong inclination not to leave differences as they are. Maybe we can call this a “passion for dialogue.” Each participant is eager to present his/her own opinion and hear the opinion of others. This goal is well documented in the preface to the book translated from Japanese to Esperanto by members of this movement:

The aim of this publication is mainly to provide materials for discussion about the history of Japanese-Korean relations. (...) After all, it is a book written by a Japanese and has such viewpoints, which can differ from, especially, Korean viewpoints. We just offer it from the Japanese side and are ready to discuss it. It is only a beginning. So, dear readers, don't just read this book but discuss with friends from different nations and report the results to us. (Kuboi 1995: iv)

And this preface is followed by an appeal to the readers: “We desire to attract as many people as possible to our discussions, because we think that the discussion by itself is valuable, no less than the probable results.”

The symposia and other meetings can be seen as realisations of this appeal. And the “passion for dialogue,” to present one's own opinion and listen to the opinion of others, prevails throughout the symposia. Even the most “nationalistic” contribution, mentioned above, asserting the superiority of Korean culture, is no exception, but rather typical in mentioning its double aims: according to the presenter, the primary aim of his report is to show the Japanese participants the real feelings of not a few Koreans about Japan. But he also stated: “I want really to correct my prejudice, if it is misguided, through comments from Japanese participants” (*Mi volas vere ĝustigi mian antaŭjuĝon, se ĝi estas misĝvidita, pere de la komentoj de japanaj simpozianoj*).

Another common stance among the participants is the conviction that intercultural dialogue must be conducted not only among professionals or

politicians but also by ordinary people. The term “symposium” may be misleading as the symposia were not arranged to have “ordinary” participants listen to the speeches of invited panelists-specialists. While there were also professional historians invited as guest speakers at the second symposium, the bulk of the symposia — as well as of other theme sessions of this group — consisted of presentations by participants, mostly non-professionals, about history. In these presentations the speakers addressed a theme they themselves had each chosen from the history of relations between Japan and Korea. The report of the symposia emphasises that “it is important that ordinary people took part and that they reviewed the history of relations between Korea and Japan and so could deepen their historical knowledge” (Terajima 1998:2). One participant commented:

We certainly can neither find new historical facts nor add to the latest historical research. But is that our aim? I don't think so. We want to create appropriate perspectives, from both international and national points of view, among ordinary citizens. And who will create our own views on history if not we ourselves? (Terajima 1998:47)

It thus seems reasonable to conclude that not only a commitment to linguistic equality but also a sort of metacommunicative ideology of “popular dialogue” is a common stance among the participants. This ideology seeks to enhance understanding where there are intercultural differences, and to do this above all at a citizen level.

### **Esperantism as a metacommunicative ideology**

My intention here is not simply to point to some common traits among the participants of certain groupings of Esperantists. To uncover a willingness to discuss historical matters at a symposium on history is rather unsurprising. But there is some evidence that the metacommunicative ideology found in our case is not just confined to the participants in this activity but is a widely shared characteristic among Esperantists.

First of all, we can point out that this metacommunicative ideology is closely related to the design of Esperanto itself. The stated goal of linguistic neutrality means, sociolinguistically speaking, nothing other than that it is used by no community in everyday life. So, the language can only function if there is a *reciprocal* demand for communication across linguistic boundaries. A mutual

willingness of speakers of different languages to communicate is a precondition for the language's existence. And mutual willingness is a basic condition for transforming linguistic expression from monologue to dialogue. Thus we can say that the language is designed for intercultural dialogue. The involvement of "ordinary people" in this process is also part of the original design of the language, as Esperanto was intentionally constructed to be easily learnable for everyone through its creativity in word-building and avoidance of irregularities in the grammar.

These considerations on the characteristics of the original design of the language make it clear that the idea of intercultural dialogue among ordinary people is an "internal idea," embodied in the language in the true sense. For our theme of "reconciliation through communication" this "internal idea" has a strong affinity to the idea of solving conflicts neither by violence nor by conferences at the top political level, but through accumulation of "grassroots" experiences of communication across conflict boundaries.

The design of a product does not guarantee that it will really be used as intended. But in the case of Esperanto we can observe that the design of the language selected its users, or, to put it more correctly, the proposed language was adopted by those who had some affinity with the "internal idea" (in the metacommunicative sense). Available data on value orientations tend to confirm this; for instance, a pilot survey which asked Esperantists to list their three "most admired" public figures of the modern era produced a list headed by two outstanding figures of nonviolence, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, while no clear general political tendency could be detected among the informants (Rašić 1994: 129ff.). On the other hand, the absence of political/economic pressure to learn/use the language has "deselected" those who do not support this metacommunicative "internal idea" — among them not only "realists," who found the idea of a planned international language too utopian, but perhaps also those who might have sympathised with Zamenhof's humanism but did not feel motivated to learn the language. Acquiring Esperanto, however easy to learn it may be compared to other languages, still requires a genuine effort.

## Conclusion

The above findings both challenge and support the existence of an "internal idea" in the Esperanto language. The humanistic "internal idea" that Zamenhof

linked to the language of Esperanto continues to influence the present-day Esperanto movement, providing its members with a distinctive philosophy for the reconciliation of humankind. This conception cannot be regarded as a universal or defining trait of the Esperanto movement, however. Neither can the latter be described simply as a movement to promote an easily-learned neutral tool for international communication. In its metacommunicational aspect the Esperanto movement, otherwise quite heterogeneous in its social or political thinking, presents a common front, in so far as it has developed a passionate ideology of popular dialogue across cultures as a basis for mutual rapprochement. In this sense the Esperanto movement is in its essence a cultural movement rather than a purely linguistic movement.

This insight offers an answer to our initial question about whether Esperanto can be regarded as a “language for reconciliation.” It surely cannot be plausibly maintained that a language is automatically linked to some specific idea or ideal or can be used only for special purposes. But languages neither freely combine with any idea, nor are in reality used for all purposes. As Phillipson points out, “the argument that any language can serve any purpose, a good as well as a bad, has to be relativised according to the real function which individual languages fulfil in certain empirical circumstances” (1997:50; see also Skutnabb-Kangas 1998).

In the case of Esperanto, because of its affinity with certain meta-communicative ideas through its original (socio)linguistic design, and also as a result of external conditions, the movement is essentially guided by a passion for reciprocal understanding between ordinary people of different cultures. The preponderance of Esperanto’s use in certain domains, particularly those concerning friendship and reconciliation, can be regarded a consequence of this tendency. And in this sense Esperanto can be called a language for reconciliation. In its culture of promoting popular dialogue while avoiding a linguistic advantage for either side — what we might call the “metacommunicative ideology of Esperantism” — lies the basic contribution, quantitatively tiny but qualitatively unique, of this movement for a culture of “reconciliation through communication.” My purpose in this paper was to identify a meta-communicative ideology as a common minimum of the Esperanto movement. The impact of Zamenhof’s humanistic ideals, to which a considerable part of Esperantists remain committed, remains an issue for future analysis of the Esperanto movement.

## Notes

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1. The order of the countries is alphabetic, following the practices of the Esperanto Group for Common Textbooks on History. The term “Esperantist” is used here for speakers of the Esperanto language. English translations are by the author of this article, unless otherwise indicated.

2. The currency of the term and the concept is demonstrated by a recent example from East Asia. The “Resolution of Asian Esperantists Regarding Textbooks on History Approved by the Japanese Government” adopted by participants of the 33rd Korean Esperanto Congress, 26 August 2001, includes the passage: “creating a world of justice, neutrality, equality and friendship on the ground of love, which is the essence of the internal idea contained in Esperanto (...)”.

3. At first Zamenhof named his philosophy *Hilelismo* (Hillelism), after the rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus. He described it as “a doctrine that, without separating a person from his native country, or language, or religion, gives him the possibility of avoiding all untruths and antagonisms in the principles of his national religion and of communicating with people of all languages and religions on a basis that is neutrally human, on principles of common brotherhood, equality and justice” (*Dogmo de hilelismo*, English translation cited from Janton 1993:31). Hillelism was later renamed *homaranismo*. As Lee clarifies, the basic core of homaranismo is “amo” (love), upon which four columns are set: equality, neutrality, justice and brotherhood (Lee et al. 2001:29). For details see Janton 1993:32.

4. For the original text of this and other speeches I have relied on Kawanisi and Mine 1997

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## Zusammenfassung

### *Die Kommunikationsideologie von Esperanto: Dargestellt anhand Japanisch-koreanischer Dialoge*

Die Frage, ob Esperanto mit einer spezifischen humanistischen Ideologie untrennbar verbunden ist, wurde seit den Anfangsjahren dieser Bewegung wiederholt diskutiert. Um dieser Frage nachzugehen, werden in diesem Beitrag Diskussionen zwischen japanischen und koreanischen Esperanto-Sprechern über die Versöhnung dieser beiden Nationen analysiert. Aus der Untersuchung geht hervor, dass einerseits nicht alle Anhänger der Esperanto-Bewegung die Ideale des Initiators teilen. Andererseits kann jedoch von einer gemeinsamen metekommunikativen Ideologie gesprochen werden, die fördernd und stabilisierend auf den Dialog zwischen Bürgern mit verschiedenen sprachlichen und kulturellen Hintergründen einwirkt.

## Resumo

### *La prikomunikada ideologio de Esperanto: Japanaj-koreaj manifestiĝoj*

La demando, ĉu Esperanton karakterizas difinita humanisma ideologio, estas multe diskutita ekde la fruaj jaroj de la movado. Ĉi tie oni esploras ĝin surbaze de dokumentitaj diskutoj inter japanaj kaj koreaj esperantistoj pri repaciĝo inter iliaj du landoj. El tiu esploro eblas konkludi ke, kvankam ne ĉiuj esperantistoj dividas la konvinkojn de la iniciatinto de Esperanto, oni ja rajtas paroli pri komuna prikomunikada ideologio kiu valorigas dialogon inter ordinaraj homoj el malsamaj lingvaj kaj kulturaj fonoj.

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