

Esperanto, an Asian Language?: Growth-promoting and Growth-limiting Factors in an Evolving Interlingual Ecosystem

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Esperanto has a long history in Asia, a fact often neglected in discussions of its cultural and social significance. That history includes the dimensions of politics, identity, and education, which together situate the language within a complex network of interpersonal and interlingual relationships. If one wishes to forecast the future evolution of such a system, one needs to understand the structural factors that limit Esperanto's growth, along with the factors that propel its spread. Such an analysis sheds light not only on Esperanto's characteristics as a language, but also on the broader linguistic ecosystem within which it constitutes a minor but noteworthy index of systemic change.

A few weeks after the Nitobe Symposium in Tokyo, the Japanese and Korean Esperanto movements will celebrate a noteworthy anniversary. Every year for the past quarter-century, the so-called Komuna Seminario has brought together young people from Japan, South Korea, and more recently China, to explore their similarities and differences. The numbers involved are not large – a few dozen at a time. But the fact that this tradition has endured for a full generation, over a period that has seen radical political, cultural, and economic changes in the region, offers a glimpse into the niche that Esperanto occupies in Asian society. Note, first, that these events are not the initiative of some well-meaning branch of government, educational institution, or international NGO. Nor are they obviously part of some broader political process or movement. They take place, first and

foremost, because the participants find them fulfilling.

There is, therefore, a strongly personal dimension to such gatherings. Esperanto is not inherited or imposed, but chosen. Such meetings do draw on a identifiable cultural tradition, but it is one which the participants have a sense of deliberately recreating, each time they meet.

One of the most interesting, and characteristic, aspects of this process is the informal learning that takes place. Here is a typical example from the very first Komuna Seminario. Sparked by a controversy over Japanese history textbooks – a topic that seems to be equally current today – the Japanese and Korean participants held their own discussion. Writing recently in *La Lanterno Azia*, KITAGAWA Hisasi recalled: And what did we achieve through this debate? No formal conclusions with long phrases, nor a resolution to communicate to the press. We must confess that in that respect our discussion could not lead to anything truly original. Many of us had to acknowledge in passing that our feelings and ideas were a bit too great for adequate expression by means of our still limited linguistic abilities. And yet, following a discussion that may have been stumbling but was certainly serious and passionate, we definitely achieved something I feel to be much more essential, much more valuable and lasting than some formal document that would be out of date the next day: that is, mutual transnational trust among all of the participants. At least I, for one, felt that the young Koreans whom I met in the Seminario were all brothers and sisters in our human family, with whom I would willingly remain friends.

Now it seems clear that such a discussion could not happen in the same way in either Korean or Japanese, or at least, the outcome would be quite different. But it is reasonable to ask, could it not take place in other European-origin languages that have found a niche in Asian societies? The most plausible alternative language would be, of course, English. Yet if we reflect briefly on the three dimensions of this social setting that were commented on briefly above – the political, the

individual, and the educational – we shall see that choosing English creates a significantly different set of possibilities. Languages position their speakers politically, by virtue of their implication in social power structures and historical processes. For the past sixty years (as Probal Dasgupta has shown in the case of India), English has been an important part of a technical, authoritative, workaholic process of modernization in Asia; more recently, globalization. If the Komuna Seminario became a Binational Workshop, the stakes would be raised considerably. The high ground in any discussion would be occupied by instrumental rationalism – the unspoken justification for English’s ongoing role in Asia. In place of the open-ended exploration described by Kitagawa, one would have a process with a built-in direction to it: onwards.

Languages position their speakers individually, through the kinds of relationships, functional domains and social identities they make available. In the case of English, this has a lot to do with the way the language is learned. Most Asians who become proficient in English do so through success in formal schooling, perhaps coupled with extended residency overseas – both distinct marks of privilege. Even if other Asian youth are invited to an English-language seminar, their relative lack of ease in the language is likely to relegate them to the margins of the discussion. Esperanto has more relaxed speech norms that have little to do with social position – a situation that encourages more equal participation and a playfulness that is rarely found in gatherings using English as a foreign language.

Languages position their speakers educationally, in the way they encourage certain ways of making sense of the world and enable certain kinds of creative work to be done. In Asia, English is primarily used for planning, management, business and science – the domains of technical reason. Esperanto is typically used in far less formal settings, for purposes that might best be described as aesthetic: forging friendships, making music, discovering new ways of looking at the world. Of course, any language can be used for any purpose, at least

in principle. But because languages are transmitted not as abstract templates but as systems of use, one would expect the Komuna Seminario and the Binational Workshop to organize time differently, to foster different attitudes and interests, to make different opportunities available. It will readily be seen that these three categories are not fully independent of each other. Furthermore, each has complexities we will not be able to explore in this paper.

However, they provide a foundation on which to proceed.

Our task is to understand why some people in Asia choose to learn and use Esperanto, and what those choices tell us about the dynamics of the broader Asian language system. Our hope is that a better understanding of these issues will also yield insight into possible futures, and the policy alternatives currently available. And our starting point is this one concrete token of the ways in which Esperanto is actually being used.

Exploring modernity

The discussion of Japanese history textbooks continues a thread in Esperanto culture that goes back to its origins in the ethnic and sectarian rivalries of Bialystok, an obscure provincial town in the western reaches of the Russian empire. During his boyhood in the 1860s, the author of Esperanto, Ludovic Zamenhof, came to see these divisions as one of the chief causes of human suffering. Through Esperanto, and through a parallel project for a universal interreligious ethical framework he came to call “homaranismo,” he hoped to enable people to meet on equal terms, to work through their differences and deepen mutual trust, understanding, and respect.

Idealistic as Zamenhof’s thinking was, it was also deeply prescient. When British historian Eric Hobsbawm summed up the story of “the short 20th century,” the period from 1914 to 1989, he characterized it as an era dominated by religious wars – using the term “religion” to encompass the secular ideologies that proved equally

powerful at mobilizing the resources of states for mutual destruction. The textbook controversy reflects the legacy of one region's involvement in this disastrous cultural phase whose impact continues to be felt by all of us.

What happened was that processes of centralization and codification, already well established in Western Europe when Zamenhof was born, continued their spread into the multiethnic empires of Eastern Europe, the diverse colonies of Asia and Africa, and the fast-developing states of the Americas and the Pacific, where they received new interpretations and new impetus. Global systems began to develop that were less tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty, that demanded classifications, rank-ordering, borders, controls, and universality. In societies characterized by extreme inequality, intergroup rivalry and distrust, this was a recipe for the development of mutually opposing absolutes: fascism versus communism, nationalism versus imperialism, doctrines of racial purity versus liberal cosmopolitanism. These were not atavistic departures from the modern project: they were applications of it.

But modernity is a many-faceted phenomenon. Throughout Esperanto's history, many of the language's advocates have seen themselves, in some sense, as being truer to the spirit of modernity than the borders and ideologies that modernity brought into being. And this self-understanding, on the part of Asian speakers of Esperanto among others, is important and widespread enough, I think, to warrant some further explication.

The Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman distinguishes between two aspects or phases of cultural evolution in the 20th century. The first of these, and historically prior, is solid modernity, which has sought to build certainty and impose control over vast territories and populations. This is the form of modernity I have tried briefly to describe, but I have certainly not done justice to its ubiquitous impact on our lives, for better and for worse. As will be addressed in a moment, its linguistic implications have certainly been among the most

far-reaching.

Developing within the frameworks of solid modernity, and becoming ever more apparent as a feature of our everyday lives and identities, is the cultural phase of liquid modernity, in which capital, ideas, information, and individuals flow ever more quickly and unconstrainably around the globe. One might date the ascendancy of liquid modernity from the end of Hobsbawm's "short century," in 1989, but it is not, of course, a new phenomenon. Even though the two versions of modernity may seem to be at ideological odds with one another, sociologically they are inextricably intertwined. This will become apparent as we further explore the case of Esperanto.

A small ecological niche

From an Asian perspective, Esperanto has always been associated with Europe, the region where modernity had its beginnings. The techniques of colonization, by which solid modernity was developed and maintained, were European in origin, and indeed were applied with great success to the territories of Europe itself in the process of nation-building. Thus from the earliest years of Esperanto in Asia, the language was associated with modernization, technical rationalism, and social progress. If one follows the debate over Esperanto in Chinese intellectual circles in the years 1918-1920, for instance, one finds the language represented as a newer, more perfect form of normative communication tool, providing a standard of comparison with which to critique and improve standard Chinese. Such interpretations of Esperanto resemble those that the French intellectuals of twenty years earlier had found so attractive, much to Zamenhof's dismay. From such a perspective, Esperanto represented a technological advance akin to the telegraph or the railway, and equally universal and politically neutral in its application.

What are the attractions of a language seen to embody the aspirations of solid modernity? Well, one feels oneself to be part

of the vanguard of progress, a herald of the future; and because the future will, by definition, be better than the past, this confers a sense of superior worth on one's self as well. But this is an identity that requires affirmation, some indication that the world is indeed moving in one's direction. So it becomes important to ally one's adherence to Esperanto with a modernist vision of the future, be it Marxist, liberal cosmopolitan, technicist, or whatever. Once this is accomplished, all signs of progress towards such a "social imaginary," as Charles Taylor calls it, can be used to bolster one's linguistic identity as well.

The difficulty for Esperanto, however, is that there are competing linguistic identities affiliated with solid modernity, and these are much more tightly connected to other social structures. Foremost amongst these is evidently the classic European formula of one standard national language for every state, which is still an ideal of immense political and bureaucratic power. In one form or another, it has been debated in every Asian nation, leaving traces of its influence in such places as the Indian constitution, with its provision for the eventual abandonment of English as a national language, or in the elaborate language planning efforts behind Bahasa Indonesia or Pilipino.

One of the defining characteristics of solid modernity, one of the qualities that renders it solid, is its addiction to systematization. Thus as a particular linguistic ideal takes shape in the beliefs, practices, and institutions of a society, alternative linguistic beliefs and practices become increasingly marginalized; indeed, such marginalization provides a good indicator of modern solidification. So the adoption of the European language model, while not necessarily leading to deliberate suppression of minority languages, certainly places greater pressure on those language communities to centralize and codify their own linguistic norms, establish administrative control over their territories and institutions, and accommodate their educational practices to national norms.

Esperanto does not fit well within this framework. A language without a centre, without a localized, governable population of

speakers, cannot easily be assimilated to the European language model. And so, as an expression of allegiance to solid modernity, Esperanto in Asia, as elsewhere, has been fighting a long and losing battle. It is not that the language is in principle incompatible with the ideas and practices of solid modernity, but that in practice those ideas and practices have taken a different route, from which there is no ready escape.

But this does not exhaust the sense in which Esperanto can be said, and felt, to be a modern language, and through which a speaker can express a modern identity; for solid modernity itself is self-limiting. The adoption of similar economic, educational, and political practices in so many places creates conditions for the emergence of systems that escape the desired certainties and securities of local control. Even on the ideological level, modernity has been associated since its earliest days with visions of individual emancipation made possible by some form of universal order, whether based on reason, faith, or authority.

Thus, co-existing with the structures and beliefs of solid modernity, both relying on them and chafing against their constraints, has been the mobile social phase termed “Gesellschaft” by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, more than a century before Bauman coined the term “liquid” modernity to express a similar insight.

Gesellschaft, the community of individuals sharing little but living space, is enabled by the European language model, which educates the speakers of diverse dialects towards a single standard tongue and thereby enables them to share the same social space. Yet the logic of Gesellschaft is simultaneously frustrated by the principle of linguistic autonomy for every state, which privileges governmental control over individual mobility. The outcome at the supranational level, of course, is the strangely hybrid system we are all familiar with, whereby the emergent transnational system of liquid modernity has strongly favoured convergence on the most widespread post-imperial language, English, while the nation-based structures of solid modernity render access to that language extremely problematic for the majority of

people in Asia and the rest of the world.

In some respects, as will already be apparent, Esperanto is more compatible with the beliefs and practices of liquid modernity than it is with those of solid modernity. A language without a centre poses no problem for the dynamics of *Gesellschaft*. This was noted by a prominent Asian intellectual as early as 1921, when Nitobe Inazo visited the world Esperanto congress in Prague. In the report he wrote for the League of Nations, he expressed hope for the language's potential to achieve in reality the kind of international solidarity that European languages could not deliver, at least for anyone who was not a member of the educated classes. And here too, as in the case of solid modernity, there seems to be no reason in principle that Esperanto could not fulfill the modernist role envisioned for it.

In practice, however, the development of liquid modernity throughout the 20th century has been shaped and channeled by the structures of solid modernity. It is no accident that English has come to be positioned as the pre-eminent language of globalization: the enormous social and financial capital invested in the language by governments around the world, including such prominent Asian countries as India, China, and Japan, created the conditions in which this particular linguistic variant of liquid modernity could flourish. Such an outcome was arguably rendered unavoidable by the inability of the European language model to address linguistic issues above the level of the nation state, except in the form of diplomatic compromise. Nitobe's League of Nations proved incapable of addressing Esperanto seriously, as did its successor, the United Nations, because there was simply no language management framework on offer that could operate at a global scale.

As a consequence, from a modernist point of view, Esperanto speakers in Asia are left in a precarious situation. It is increasingly difficult to imagine a future in which Esperanto plays the kind of role solid modernity would demand: normalized, elaborated, integrated with systems of education and governance. Some Esperanto speakers

in Europe are clearly still attracted to such a vision in the context of the European Union, but Asia does not appear to offer any similar kind of social imaginary. Perhaps world federalism, world socialism, and related visions can provide a tenuous lifeline for what remains of solidist aspirations in the continent. My feeling, however, is that none of these is actually a realistic proposition.

In the increasingly liquid world of late modern Asia, Esperanto probably holds a more secure place, albeit rather marginal. Even though English clearly dominates continental visions of economic mobility and access to global culture, a range of other European languages, including Esperanto, offer sufficiently distinctive goods to continue to attract a small proportion of second-language speakers. Among such goods are the interpersonal solidarity and friendship noted by Nitobe; the creative possibilities of the language, accessible to ordinary speakers to a degree unmatched by any other second language; and the long tradition of idealism associated with Esperanto. While it may accommodate such a niche, however, liquid modernity offers no support to Esperanto as a social or political project. Do as you wish, it tells the language's speakers, but don't impose your preferences on anyone else.

If we come back to the Komuna Seminario, we can see that it relies on exactly these linguistic goods. Politically, it situates participants outside any activist projects of democratic reform: note Kitagawa's skepticism about formal resolutions and press releases. Individually, it maximizes fluidity and spontaneity of interaction. Educationally, it encourages a kind of humanist solidarity that seeks to minimize difference. The event does not require the auspices of solid modernity – professional organizers, invited speakers, board elections, action plans – for its justification. Its grounds are the grounds of individual personal fulfillment.

There is more going on here, however, as we shall see in a moment.

Alternative futures

Our analysis so far has shown that contemporary Asia presents a linguistic ecosystem in which Esperanto occupies an interesting but marginal niche, in which English has attained remarkable dominance, and in which language decisions are intimately bound up with the development of modernity as a cultural system.

It is always tempting to assume that the future will resemble the present. The astonishing dynamism of modernity, constantly on display through new consumer goods, scientific discoveries, and cultural forms, certainly nurtures the belief that it can endure indefinitely. If it does, the struggle to reconcile solidity and fluidity will continue, with some sort of global society emerging in fits and starts. As the pre-eminent language of both solid and liquid modernity, English is likely to retain its dominant position under such conditions.

However, at least two scenarios can be readily envisioned that could radically alter this linguistic ecosystem.

One would be the development of technology that provides accurate, affordable, and user-friendly translation for at least the major national languages, both in speech and writing. While this has proven an elusive goal, the development of ever more powerful computing technologies and computer-based approaches to linguistic analysis and artificial intelligence suggests that it cannot be ruled out. In such circumstances, English would quickly lose its privileged position: speakers of any major language would have access to the same texts, the same markets, as those of any other major language.

It is hard to say what would happen to Esperanto in such conditions, but it seems unlikely that it would play a major role in the newly liquified sphere of global communication. Assuming that, say, any language with more than a million speakers would have the economic base to develop intertranslatability, the overwhelming majority of the world's population would have access to at least one translatable language. Esperanto would retain some cultural and

historical interest, but there would not appear to be any compelling reason for more people to learn and use it than in the present era. The original objective of Esperanto, however, would have been essentially fulfilled.

Yet such a possibility may be moot, in light of our second scenario, which stems from the evident inability of modernity, in either its solid or liquid forms, to inhabit and exploit cultural and economic systems in a sustainable way. Doubts about this began to be widely expressed in the 1950s and 60s, and today they have become commonplace, but it is not at all clear what might replace modernity as a cultural system. So pervasive are the habits of thought and action formed in the modern era that most publicly debated responses to the ecological crisis, or to the disappearance of small cultures and languages, or to the hollowing-out of democratic systems, or to persistent interethnic and interreligious hatreds, or to the lack of purpose and direction experienced by hundreds of millions of people, are themselves variations on old modernist themes.

It is possible, however, that modernity is simply not a long-term option. While it is certainly robust enough to withstand several severely disruptive events, it is unlikely to remain resilient indefinitely. Consider a few of the possibilities. Climate change could reduce the habitability of some of the most densely populated areas on earth, such as Western Europe (disappearance of the Gulf Stream leading to a drastic shortening of the growing season), southern California and Mexico (drought), Bangladesh (rising sea levels), and so on. Global pandemics could inflict massive damage on economic and social systems. Collapse of insect pollination systems could lead to worldwide crop failure. Weapons of mass destruction could be used against centres of political power. The very fact that it is so easy to reel off such a list, each item on it plausible enough to have engaged large numbers of experts in planning emergency responses, is indicative of the reality of the impending crisis.

The alternative to collapse is transformation. In the same way that

modernity had its roots in processes that began many centuries before Descartes, any cultural order to follow modernity will assuredly have its roots in phenomena that are familiar to us today, but seem of little importance. Even the notion of an era “after” modernity may be too heavily influenced by the linear concept of time that modernity has drummed into our culture. More helpful may be to see modernity as a historical phase, long in the living but brief and anomalous from the perspective of human development as a whole. What came before and after, and persistently asserted itself in myriad ways even at the height of modernity’s reign, might be termed transmodernity.

Let me be clear here: we will be living with the legacy of modernity forever; it has changed the world and our understanding of it, for good and for ill. But what is gradually becoming clearer is how inadequate modernity is, how short-sighted and foolish are its claims to rule. It is this realization, as it sinks into our conceptions of ourselves, our societies, our future, that holds the potential of dramatic change. And as we shall see in a moment, that change would need to address issues of language as well.

Modernity sought (and still seeks) systematization and control; transmodernity asked (and still asks) about sufficiency, adequacy, and beauty. Until the advent of the modern era, these were the cultural ideals shared by a high proportion of humanity, and reflected in, say, Aristotelean, Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist notions of proportion, moderation, and balance. This is not to speak of the premodern era as some kind of Golden Age, for people were in many ways poorer, more ignorant, and more vulnerable then than they are now. It is to say, however, that modernity has entailed enormous losses as well as remarkable gains, and many of those losses have to do with our ability to see the world steadily and whole. The only way to put modernity in its place and off our backs is deliberately to cultivate that ability once more: through science, through art, through experience, through dreams.

Asia, of course, has much to contribute to such efforts – perhaps

more, at this juncture, than Europe and the other societies of the West, so effective have the latter been at self-colonization. This is not the Asia of solid modernity or liquid modernity, but an Asia we know to still be there, outside the zone of gleaming lights and frenzied crowds. It is an Asia that typically expresses itself in the high languages of the past – Sanskrit, classical Mandarin – or in the vernaculars of village life, not in what Ivan Illich called the packaged uniqueness of television scripts, news reports, and government forms. Away from these colonized domains of modernity, some small part of this Asia also uses Esperanto.

For, in my view, Esperanto forms one unique and irreplaceable facet of the transmodern project. Like other transmodern ideas and practices, Esperanto has a complexity and integrity that defies assimilation to one form of modernity or another. The qualities that make it appealing to solidist imaginations, or the linguistic goods that attract the freewheeling spirit of *Gesellschaft*, are part of a larger whole that cannot be seen through modern lenses. It is not that Esperanto is sufficient unto itself as a language of global communication – rather, precisely the reverse. Esperanto complements other linguistic systems, helping articulate them with one another, and giving its users a place to stand outside the tangles of solidist and fluidist ideology. Used carefully, with sufficiency, adequacy, and beauty, it helps us see the world steadily and whole.

To come back to the *Komuna Seminario*, then: In the twenty-five years of its existence, it has built a small cultural tradition that offers a unique vantage point to its participants, in a microcosm of Esperanto culture on a global scale. As the necessary medium of such initiatives, Esperanto can justly be termed an Asian language. More profoundly, it offers a window onto processes of politics, identity, and culture that help to define Asia's present and future. As such, it merits greater attention from sociolinguists and language planners than it has generally received.

There are no particular reasons to be optimistic that the people

of Asia, any more than the rest of humanity, will awake from the modernist fever of the West before it consumes them. Nonetheless the possibility exists. For those looking for alternatives, Esperanto offers a particular kind of linguistic identity that nurtures such wakefulness. Since the culture of the language is shaped by the same contradictory pulls of solidity and liquidity, systematization and sustainability, that affect the societies in which we all live, it matters a great deal how the Asian speakers of Esperanto themselves conceive of their project. Tracing their changing perspectives in the years to come will provide one small measure of our progress (or lack of it) towards a more livable world.

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