

# Esperanto & Anarchism

## A universal language

Xavi Alcalde

“Paroli Esperanton estis iam esenca parto de anarkiismo.”

(There was a time when speaking Esperanto was an essential part of being an anarchist.)

When 97-year-old, Barcelona-born Eduardo Vivancos walks down the streets of Toronto where he has lived as an exile since 1954, he never comes across another Esperanto speaker.

However, when he first learned the language in June 1937, in the middle of the Spanish Civil War and Revolution, he thought that it was a natural element of the libertarian world.

It was.

At that time, in cities such as Barcelona and Valencia, there were Esperanto courses and groups in every ateneo (anarchist social center). The CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), the anarcho-syndicalist union, published a paper, *Nia Bulteno* (Our Bulletin), with articles in this language. Every other relevant group in Spain also had Esperanto publications. The anti-Stalinist Marxist group, the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista), whose militia George Orwell joined, also published a paper in Esperanto. The Propaganda Commissioner for the Catalan government, Aume Miravittles, later explained that they used Esperanto in official documents to reach international anarchists.

Esperanto was created in 1887 by Dr. L.L. Zamenhof in Bialystok, Poland. His idea was to develop an easy-to-learn international auxiliary language for communication between people of different countries. It was designed without grammar irregularities and with a clear correspondence between sounds and letters.

The initial vocabulary and sounds of Esperanto were taken from European languages (the majority Romance, the minority Germanic, with a small portion of Slavic). For example, *demokratio* and *revolucio* would be intuitively understood by speakers of many European tongues. Some words from other language groups have been added over the years.

However, the nature of Esperanto's word-building is typical in Japanese and Korean, as well as a number of other non-European languages. This characteristic is rare in European languages (Hungarian, Finnish, and Estonian are exceptions).

Esperanto's flexible word-order also allows writers and speakers of both European and non-European languages to use the method of speaking they are used to and still be easily understood in this world language. So, while the initial vocabulary is undeniably European in nature, other aspects of the language have allowed Esperanto to have a truly international following of up to 2,000,000 people at various times.

Zamenhof hoped to help foster human fraternity through direct communication between people from different places.

Esperanto, he reasoned, would benefit those interested in international contacts for a number of reasons and, eventually, world peace. It gained the support of such anarchists as Tolstoy and Malatesta.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were hundreds of Esperanto groups in every corner of the world, although most were in Europe and the Americas. It was taught in anarchist Modern Schools in the United States.

World War I was a tremendous blow to the Esperanto movement's utopian ideals of superseding nations and nationalism. However, the language saw a resurgence of interest during the interwar period. Much of the workers movement of the 1920s embraced the new language because participants saw it as a necessary tool to unite the proletarians of the world.

Some early Communists supported use of the language. To cope with difficulties of communication during the Second Congress of the Third International in Moscow in 1920, one of the attendees, the Spanish Anarcho-syndicalist Angel Pestaña suggested Esperanto. He praised it as a workers' Latin, as a way to facilitate communication within the association.

In some countries, such as Japan and China, most of the pioneer Esperantists were anarchists and the language helped them to directly communicate with anarchists in Europe and the Americas.

But Esperanto advocates experienced persecution and even execution in both Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union because the ideas they promoted were considered subversive of state power.

Nevertheless, to a great extent, Zamenhof's ideals of internationalism and peace were transmitted to the utopian revolutionaries such as the Spanish anarchists of the 1930s who had "a new world in their hearts."

In France, following World War II, Spanish exiles from Franco's Spain created an international association of Esperanto-speaking anarchists. Their official bulletin was called *Senstatano* (Without a State) and published entirely in Esperanto. Among the contributors were important Asian anarchists such as Taiji Yamaga and Lu Bo Chien.

In the current era of global communications, there has been a new interest in Esperanto, including among anarchists in various parts of the world, although it is difficult to know how many people actually are proficient in its use. Some language learning apps for mobile devices have begun offering Esperanto courses, and at least a million people have enrolled.

Those who learn Esperanto through the Internet can become familiar with such groups as Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda (SAT), the World Esperanto Association. Participants include anarchists and others who are interested in revolutionary social change.

In their last congress in Seoul in July-August 2017, SAT participants from countries around the world learned firsthand about the recent South Korean protests known as the Candlelight Revolution.

It is likely that the ongoing intention to promote solidarity inherent to Esperanto explains its survival for 130 years despite changes in political groupings, dictatorships, and persecutions. From this perspective, it has a potential that should not be underestimated. Often, learning and using the language is in itself a revolutionary act.

If you happen upon the aging but still engaged Eduardo Vivancos in Toronto, you can greet him with: *Salutoj, kompano. Paroli Esperanton estis iam esenca parto de anarkiismo.* (Greetings, companero. Esperanto still lives, as does the anarchist ideal.)

You're on your own after that.

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