

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #069

Esperanto

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can learn fascinating things about the world, and listen to weird and wonderful stories at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about Esperanto, the world's most popular man-made language.

[00:00:31] We'll talk about where it came from, how it works, why it works, and we'll even hear a few people speaking it.

[00:00:40] It's going to be a pretty exciting one, especially if you are interested in how languages are created, so without further ado¹, let's get started.

¹ without wasting any more time

Esperanto

[00:00:53] Now, in the world today there are around 7,000 languages spoken. As we found out in the last episode, two thirds of the world's population speaks just 12 different languages, and there is a real risk of lots of the other less popular languages dying out.

[00:01:14] But imagine a world where everyone spoke the same language. All 8 billion of us could communicate with each other, in the same language.

[00:01:26] How would that world be different?

[00:01:30] Well, one man certainly saw the benefits of removing language barriers, and saw the opportunities that would exist if everyone were able to speak the same language.

[00:01:44] That man's name was Ludwik Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto.

[00:01:50] He was born in a place called Bialystok, in the year 1859.

[00:01:57] Bialystok was, at that time, part of Russia, but it is now part of Poland, quite close to the border with Belarus.

[00:02:08] Zamenhof was [acutely](#)² aware of how language unites and divides.

² feeling or noticing something very strongly

Esperanto

[00:02:15] His parents **descended**³ from Lithuanian Jews, and his father was a German and French teacher. Zamenhof himself was fluent in **Yiddish**⁴ and Russian, and he learned German, French, and Hebrew from his father.

[00:02:34] Living in Bialystok, he could also speak Polish and Belarusian, which were both spoken by different local communities.

[00:02:43] At school, he studied Latin and Greek, as well as Aramaic. And it is said that he could also speak some English, although not to a particularly high level.

[00:02:55] So, if you are counting, we have hit 11 languages already.

[00:03:01] But it wasn't just because he had learned so many languages, and was a bit of a language **buff**⁵ that he ended up creating his own language.

[00:03:11] Living in such an ethnically and linguistically diverse place with so many different internal conflicts and wars, Zamenhof **theorised**⁶ that the fact there were so many different languages, that people couldn't easily communicate with one another, that was one of the main reasons that there was so much conflict.

³ come from, to be related to

⁴ a language related to German that is spoken by some Jewish people, especially in Eastern Europe

⁵ someone who knows a lot about something and is interested in it

⁶ thought that something could be explained by something else

Esperanto

[00:03:34] If only there were a way for everyone to understand each other, for there to be no [room](#)⁷ for miscommunication, then the endless wars and conflict that had [plagued](#)⁸ Europe would just go away.

[00:03:50] A world with one common language would mean that we could all understand each other, linguistically and therefore culturally, and as a result, everyone would live together in harmony.

[00:04:05] It's not hard to imagine why Zamenhof came to this conclusion. Poland had experienced centuries of conflict, and any peace it had experienced hadn't ever lasted particularly long.

[00:04:21] At the time Zamenhof was growing up, Poland was a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic country, a real [melting pot](#)⁹ of different cultures and languages, and there were frequent conflicts between these different groups.

[00:04:37] Having this common language, Zamenhof thought, would remove the main reason for the conflict, which was miscommunication.

[00:04:48] This was a [fiercely](#)¹⁰ held view by Zamenhof from a young age, and even while he was at high-school he created his first 'international language'!

⁷ opportunity, place

⁸ cause pain and suffering to (for a long time)

⁹ a place with many different people, cultures, religions and ideas

¹⁰ very strongly

Esperanto

[00:04:59] He realised though that the grammar of this language, the first language he created, he realised it was too complex - he had based it on the grammar of Russian and [Yiddish](#), and it was only when he started studying English that he realised that any truly international language had to have a very simple grammar.

[00:05:24] Now, I know what you might be thinking - English grammar isn't easy.

[00:05:28] But it is a lot easier than the grammar of lots of other languages, and Zamenhof saw that there were [elements¹¹](#) of English that should be [incorporated¹²](#) into this future, easy to understand common language that he was trying to create.

[00:05:46] His first real project, what is now called 'Proto Esperanto', was finished in 1878, but there was only one problem.

[00:05:57] You may remember that he was born in 1859, which made him only 19 years old, too young and without the financial resources to actually publish it.

[00:06:10] It wasn't until 1887, when he was 28 years old, that he finally published 'International language: Introduction and complete textbook', under the [pseudonym¹³](#), the pen-name, of Doktor Esperanto.

¹¹ parts

¹² used as part of

¹³ a name used instead of a real name

Esperanto

[00:06:26] This book was published in Russian, but it **outlined**¹⁴ how to speak this new language.

[00:06:32] The language didn't have an official name though, it was just called "International Language". But early students liked the name of its **supposed**¹⁵ author, and started to call it after him, so it began to be referred to as Esperanto.

[00:06:52] I imagine that you may not have ever heard Esperanto before.

[00:06:57] So what we are going to do now is just play a little clip of some people speaking it, and you can see if it sounds at all familiar.

[00:07:07] ***PEOPLE SPEAKING ESPERANTO****

[00:07:44] There we go.

[00:07:46] If it sounds familiar, that's probably because some of the languages you speak are quite similar to it.

[00:07:54] About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the words in Esperanto have **roots**¹⁶ in Romance languages - so French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and so on - and the rest are from Germanic and Slavic languages, and also Greek.

¹⁴ set out, described

¹⁵ believed to be

¹⁶ origins

Esperanto

[00:08:09] So about half of the world's population should at least be already familiar with some of the vocabulary, which means it's easier to learn, as you aren't starting from nothing.

[00:08:23] What's more, Zamenhof created the language so that it was [intentionally](#)¹⁷ very easy to learn.

[00:08:30] You didn't need [formal](#)¹⁸ schooling, or years of study - the idea was that anyone, regardless of their educational background, should be able to learn it with 10 minutes or so of study per day.

[00:08:45] And if you think about everything that is confusing about different languages, none of those confusing things exist with Esperanto.

[00:08:55] So, unlike in English, in Esperanto you don't have phrasal verbs or irregular conjugations.

[00:09:02] And unlike in romance languages, you don't have complicated subjunctives or genders of objects.

¹⁷ on purpose

¹⁸ official, public

Esperanto

[00:09:10] And unlike Asian languages, there are no [tones¹⁹](#), and instead of having a huge list of different words for everything in Esperanto, there are '[root²⁰](#) words', and parts that are added to the start of them to change their meaning.

[00:09:27] So, to give you an example if you add 'mal', 'm a l', to the start of a word, this changes the definition to be the opposite of what the word without 'mal' means.

[00:09:42] So juna 'j u n a' is young, but maljuna, with 'mal' in front, the opposite of young is....old.

[00:09:52] And blanka is white, malblanka, opposite of 'white' is, well you might have guessed it, it's black.

[00:10:02] It is said that you can actually [get by²¹](#) with only around 500 root words in Esperanto, and you just add parts to the start to create different words and meanings.

[00:10:14] Using the language is also just a lot easier - the letter at the end of a word shows you what kind of word it is, so if it ends with an 'o', it's a noun, and if it ends with an 'a', it's an adjective.

[00:10:30] So it's very easy to get started, and very easy to actually use.

¹⁹ different ways of pronouncing the same syllable

²⁰ main part

²¹ manage, be able to deal with a situation

Esperanto

[00:10:36] Almost immediately, it started attracting followers, who became passionate about the possibilities of the language.

[00:10:45] It could mean that anyone, from anywhere, could communicate with anyone else.

[00:10:50] What an amazing thing, right?

[00:10:54] Well, yes. But as with anything new that inspires strong beliefs, it is often distrusted by the authorities. And the idea that this language would allow normal, common people from different countries and cultures to communicate with each other was considered very dangerous...

[00:11:16] Shortly after it was first published, Tsarist Russia [banned](#)²² Esperanto.

[00:11:23] Then Stalin called it 'that dangerous language', and he ordered the [deportation](#)²³ or [execution](#)²⁴ of Esperanto speakers.

²² forbidden, not allowed to be used

²³ forced to leave a country

²⁴ the punishment of killing someone

Esperanto

[00:11:33] Similarly, Hitler said that it was all part of a plan for Jewish world domination, and whenever the Nazis [came across](#)²⁵ Esperanto speakers, they were [rounded up](#)²⁶ and shot.

[00:11:46] But it wasn't just dictators and Tsarist Russia.

[00:11:52] Iran proposed that the League of Nations, the [precursor](#)²⁷ to the United Nations, Iran proposed that it adopt Esperanto, but the idea was blocked by the French.

[00:12:06] There was this view that Esperanto was a communist [plot](#)²⁸ - a way to unite the working people of the world so that they could rise up.

[00:12:17] In Japan, Esperanto speakers were referred to as 'watermelons', green on the outside, and red on the inside.

[00:12:27] Green was the adopted colour of Esperanto, it was used for Esperanto flags, and books. And red, of course, was, and still is, the colour of communism.

[00:12:39] The goal of Esperanto was to allow people from anywhere in the world, no matter their [linguistic](#)²⁹ background and social class, to communicate.

²⁵ found, discovered

²⁶ found and forced to go to prison or jail

²⁷ something that happened before something else

²⁸ a secret plan by a group of people

²⁹ relating to language or the study of language

Esperanto

[00:12:51] That might have sounded like a dangerous, communist idea, but it is one of the main reasons that people are still attracted to the language.

[00:13:00] Since its [founding](#)³⁰ over 100 years ago, Esperanto has attracted hundreds of thousands of learners.

[00:13:09] It's hard to [pinpoint](#)³¹ exactly how many people speak Esperanto, but estimates [range](#)³² from around 200,000 to 2 million.

[00:13:20] The reasons for people deciding to learn Esperanto are varied, as well.

[00:13:26] For some, it is just a fantastic [intellectual](#)³³ journey.

[00:13:32] For others, it's a way of meeting and communicating with people from all over the world, without having to learn tens of different languages.

[00:13:42] Interestingly enough, there are big communities of Esperanto speakers in East Asia. Because it's a lot easier to learn than English, it is a way for speakers of languages like Mandarin, Korean or Japanese to easily communicate with people from all over the world without having to learn English.

³⁰ creation

³¹ say exactly

³² vary, differ

³³ relating to a desire to understand things

Esperanto

[00:14:06] The actual 'community' of Esperanto speakers is very strong, and speakers exist all over the world.

[00:14:15] There's even something called Pasporta Servo, which would be 'passport service' in English, which is a way for Esperanto speakers to find and connect with other Esperanto speakers all over the world.

[00:14:29] There are stories of Esperanto speakers bicycling around the world, and staying just with other [fellow](#)³⁴ Esperanto speakers, speaking only in Esperanto.

[00:14:40] And that's a pretty cool thing, right?

[00:14:42] The idea that you can speak to anyone, anywhere, all in the same language.

[00:14:48] It's not surprising that Esperanto speakers, Esperantists, as they are called, it's not surprising they are so passionate about the benefits of the language.

[00:15:00] It's a classic example of [network effects](#)³⁵ - the more people speak it, the more useful it becomes, so the more people want to speak it, and so on.

[00:15:10] Still though, only a tiny proportion of the world's population do speak it, and for most people it's a [niche](#)³⁶, [hobbyist](#)³⁷ thing.

³⁴ someone with the same interests or job as you

³⁵ a situation when anyone who does the same thing adds value to the entire community

³⁶ something enjoyed by a small amount of people

³⁷ something that people do in their free time

Esperanto

[00:15:20] But not for everyone though. There are stories of children who were [raised](#)³⁸ speaking Esperanto, so their native language is Esperanto.

[00:15:31] There aren't many, but it is estimated that there are around 1,000 in the world.

[00:15:38] One exciting big development for Esperanto was that the language learning app Duolingo added it as a language that you could learn in the app in 2015, and it estimates that over a million users have learned Esperanto using the app since it launched.

[00:15:59] Of course, using Duolingo to learn a traditional language can be slightly problematic, but the fact that Esperanto is such a simple language means it [lends itself](#)³⁹ very nicely to something like Duolingo.

[00:16:16] And it is fantastic that this technology has meant that a new generation has at least been introduced to Esperanto, but only time will tell how many go on to actually be passionate [advocates](#)⁴⁰ of the language.

[00:16:31] Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof died in 1917, just over 100 years ago now. I wonder what he would be thinking if he could see how his creation has developed.

³⁸ brought up

³⁹ is naturally a good fit for

⁴⁰ someone who publicly supports an idea

Esperanto

[00:16:42] It has certainly attracted a [devoted⁴¹](#) following, enabled countless relationships and friendships to flourish that wouldn't have been possible without it, and perhaps, just perhaps, in hundreds of years from now the whole world will be speaking Esperanto, and his dream will finally be [realised⁴²](#).

[00:17:04] In any case, it is an amazing creation, has a pretty [noble⁴³](#) mission,

[00:17:09] And I think he would be quite amazed to see the impact that his invented language has had on the world.

[00:17:18] Okay then that is it for Esperanto.

[00:17:22] As always. I would love to know what you thought of the show.

[00:17:26] If you speak some Esperanto, I would especially love to hear from you.

[00:17:30] I'm going to try and learn a bit this weekend and listening to it while I was researching this episode really [gave me the bug⁴⁴](#).

[00:17:38] And if this episode has inspired you to spend a couple of hours learning some Esperanto, then I would also love to hear from you and we can exchange notes.

⁴¹ very loyal and passionate

⁴² achieved, fulfilled

⁴³ good in an honest and brave sense

⁴⁴ made (me) very interested in

Esperanto

[00:17:49] Now I'm going to finish this episode by trying to say a little something in Esperanto.

[00:17:56] Vi askultis anglan Lernadon por Scivolaj Mensoj, de Leonardo English.

[00:18:02] Mi estas Alastair Budge, vi restu sekura, kaj mi kaptos vin en la sekva epizodo.

[00:18:11] In case you didn't get that, I said, or at least I tried to say, you've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:18:20] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Without further ado	without wasting any more time
Acutely	feeling or noticing something very strongly
Descended	come from, to be related to
Yiddish	a language related to German that is spoken by some Jewish people, especially in Eastern Europe

Esperanto

Buff	someone who knows a lot about something and is interested in it
Theorised	thought that something could be explained by something else
Room	opportunity, place
Plagued	cause pain and suffering to (for a long time)
Melting pot	a place with many different people, cultures, religions and ideas
Fiercely	very strongly
Elements	parts
Incorporated	used as part of
Pseudonym	a name used instead of a real name
Outlined	set out, described
Supposed	believed to be
Roots	origins
Intentionally	on purpose
Formal	official, public
Tones	different ways of pronouncing the same syllable

Esperanto

Root	main part
Get by	manage, be able to deal with a situation
Banned	forbidden, not allowed to be used
Deportation	forced to leave a country
Execution	the punishment of killing someone
Came across	found, discovered
Rounded up	found and forced to go to prison or jail
Precursor	something that happened before something else
Plot	a secret plan by a group of people
Linguistic	relating to language or the study of language
Founding	creation
Pinpoint	say exactly
Range	vary, differ
Intellectual	relating to a desire to understand things
Fellow	someone with the same interests or job as you

Esperanto

Network effects	a situation when anyone who does the same thing adds value to the entire community
Niche	something enjoyed by a small amount of people
Hobbyist	something that people do in their free time
Raised	brought up
Lends itself	is naturally a good fit for
Advocates	someone who publicly supports an idea
Devoted	very loyal and passionate
Realised	achieved, fulfilled
Noble	good in an honest and brave sense
Gave me the bug	made (me) very interested in

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

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