

“Esperanto. The Feeling of Disgust”: Wittgenstein on Planned Languages

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Wittgenstein's views on Esperanto and other planned languages have hardly found attention thus far.¹ The issue was mostly perceived as a side-aspect of Wittgenstein's difficult relation to the Vienna Circle. Carnap repeatedly mentions Wittgenstein's astonishingly emotional aversion and the alleged non-organicity of Esperanto as its main reason. This seems to fit neatly to a note from 1946:

Esperanto. The feeling of disgust we get if we utter an *invented* word with invented derivative syllables. The word is cold, lacking in associations, and yet it plays at being “language”. A system of purely written signs would not disgust us so much. (*Culture and Value*, p. 52)

Again, Esperanto's non-organicity seems to be crucial, this time described as “invented words with invented derivative syllables”, and even italicised. Although straightforward explanations for Wittgenstein's aversion seem tempting (“it might simply be a facet of his cultural conservatism, he might have missed the embedding in a form of life”, etc.), none of them really explains the highly emotional tune of his statements. Maybe, the phenomenon deserves more attention. My paper provides some linguistic background (1), a broadened textual basis and its analysis (2), and a tentative interpretation (3).

1. The varieties of language engineering

Debates on planned languages often suffer from ignorance, a *priori* verdicts, and misleading old terms like “artificial” or “auxiliary languages” which enhance confusion. To begin with terminology, I propose to label English, German etc. as *ethno-languages*, and Esperanto, Volapük, Basic English, etc. as *planned languages*. Scientific investigation into them is called *interlinguistics*. The misleading term *auxiliary language* should be avoided altogether, whereas *artificial language* covers a much wider field, from formal logic over Neurath's *Isotype* to computer languages.

There is a lot of deliberate language engineering in ethno-languages: think of Dante's creation of a common Italian by selections from various dialects; the work of terminology commissions; orthography reforms; the creation or replacement of scripture systems; the choice and proclamation of a certain dialect as standard language; the creation of Ivriith on the basis of Old Hebrew. Most linguists hold that there is only a gradual difference between language engineering within ethno-languages and the creation of Esperanto and similar planned languages (Blanke 1985, 62f with further references). Hence, the dichotomy of natural/artificial has little analytical power here.

However, not all planned languages [henceforth: PLs] resemble Esperanto. There are more than 900 proposals of PLs, many of them rather dilettantic. Less than 200 were sufficiently elaborate to be called a language system, very few ever found a significant number of speakers, and only

Zamenhof's Esperanto was a success story. The following classification can help to avoid frequent misinterpretations. Historically, there is a shift from a *priori* to a *posteriori* languages. *A priori* projects attempted to replace natural languages by something completely different. Typically, they also claimed to map a real and complete system of concepts, and the device for that was the distinction and recombination of elementary concepts. The tasks of communication and calculus were often confused. The next milestone was Schleyer's Volapük (1879), a mixed language with a *priori* and a *posteriori* elements. Volapük attracted 40.000 speakers before it quickly died out after 1900. Esperanto opened the big era of a *posteriori* PLs developed on the basis of ethno-languages.

1. **A *priori* PL:** *Ars Signorum* (Dalgarno 1661), *Real Character* (Wilkins 1668), [*LogLan* (Brown 1960)]

2. **A *posteriori* PL:**

2.1 Modified Ethno-Languages

Latino sine flexione - type (Peano 1903; simplifies grammar, extensive vocabulary)

Basic English - type (Ogden 1930; reduces lexicon to 850 basic words, leaves grammar untouched)

2.2 Selection Languages

2.2.1 Compromise Languages *Anglo-Franca* (Henderson 1889), *Interglossa* (Hogben 1943)

2.2.2 Naturalistic PL *Occidental-Interlingue* (de Wahl 1922), *Interlingua* (Gode 1951)

2.2.3 Autonomous PL *Esperanto* (Zamenhof 1887), *Ido* (de Beaufront, Couturat 1907)

2.2.4 Integrative PL *Novial* (Jespersen 1928)

3. **Mixed a *priori* / a *posteriori* PL:** *Volapük* (Schleyer 1879)

Linguists agree on the following facts about Esperanto:

1. The vocabulary of Esperanto descends from Romance languages (75%), Germanic languages (20%) and others (5%). Due to extensive use of internationalisms, 80% of its words are recognisable for Romance speakers, 63% for Germanic speakers and 27% for Slavic speakers.

2. The basic principle in the construction of words is composition (roots, prefixes, suffixes), declension / conjugation is rudimentary. The rules allow the composition of new words. The orthography is phonematic (“WYSIWYG”).

3. Although not as exceptionless as Zamenhof hoped, Esperanto's regular grammar makes it extremely easy to learn, especially towards lower levels of competence.

4. Esperanto equals many ethno-languages in power, it is acknowledged as a literature language by the PEN-Club and admits of scientific texts. Among approx. 2 Million speakers worldwide, about 500.000 display a high linguistic competence, some of them are native speakers.

5. Despite pessimistic prophecies, Esperanto did not split into different languages over the decades. Esperanto develops and behaves like ethno-languages: there are phenomena such as family dialects, local dialects, new idioms, borrowed vocabularies, there is a need for permanent standardization, etc.; but the overall understandability within the Esperanto community remains intact.

¹ The only paper in the field (Nyíri 1989) is defective in various points, its merits not withstanding. Its focus is not Wittgenstein, but Esperanto, and here it transports widespread errors (e.g. that the German vocabularies in Esperanto are mostly Yiddish). Brugmann's long-falsified 1907 thesis that Esperanto will soon dissolve into different languages is presented without criticism. State-of-the-art books like Blanke 1985 and Janton 1978 are not even mentioned.

6. Many common objections to Esperanto apply to ethno-languages as well: "Esperanto is pronounced slightly different by different native speakers", "Esperanto translations by different native speakers vary slightly", "Esperanto is Euro-/ Western-centrist", "for some people, certain sounds of Esperanto are uncommon and/or difficult to discriminate in oral conversation (s/z, ĉ/ĵ/ŝ)"; "Esperanto contains diacritic letters beyond the ASCII Code", etc.

2. Wittgenstein and the planned languages

Carnap, a practising Esperantist from his youth, dedicated a whole chapter in his autobiography to language planning and his positive practical experiences with it. He was impressed by Goethe's *Iphigenie* being given on stage during an Esperanto Congress, and by a travel to the Baltic with a Bulgarian student, where all conversation was in Esperanto. We may presume that Carnap tried to convince Wittgenstein that Esperanto actually works when they met five times in summer 1927. But in Carnap's diary we read:

20.6.27: Zum ersten Mal getroffen, bei Schlick; auch Waismann. Sehr interessanter, origineller, sympathischer Mensch. Heftig gegen Esperanto weil nicht gewachsen (das hat wohl Schlick erwähnt, daß ich Anhänger sei). Künstlernatur. Über Identität, seine Einwände gegen Ramsey.

4.7.27: Mit W. bei Schlick. Wieder über Esperanto. Dann über Intuitionismus, schließlich liest er uns Wilhelm Busch vor. (Stadler 1997, 474.)

In a letter to Schlick of 28 September 1932, when Carnap muses about Wittgenstein's antipathy towards him, he remembers these meetings:

Um seine Abneigung gegen mich zu verstehen, versuche ich mich an die Zeit zu erinnern, als ich noch mit ihm zusammenkam (Sommer 1927 oder 1928). Es zeigten sich da zuweilen sehr starke Gegensätze zwischen uns, nicht so sehr in theoretischen Ansichten, als in praktischen und gefühlsmässigen Einstellungen. Er als Künstler sah in mir einen pedantischen Rationalisten, der das Lebendige vergewaltigen will (erinnere Dich an die scharfe Ablehnung des Esperanto, das Du vorwichtigerweise mehrmals zur Sprache brachtest), und einen flachen Verächter der erhabenen Dinge [...].

Retrospectively, Carnap writes in his autobiography

that the deliberately rational and unemotional attitude of the scientist and likewise any ideas which had the flavor of "enlightenment" were repugnant to Wittgenstein. At our very first meeting with Wittgenstein, Schlick unfortunately mentioned that I was interested in the problem of an international language like Esperanto. As I had expected, Wittgenstein was definitely opposed to this idea. But I was surprised by the vehemence of his emotions. A language which had not "grown organically" seemed to him not only useless but despicable. (Fann 1967, 35.)

All these documents confirm that the lack of life and organic growth were Wittgenstein's main objection to Esperanto. Presumably, the word "organically" was used by Wittgenstein himself. Evidence for that are two early texts, a diary entry and the oft-cited paragraph *TLP* 4.002:

Die Sprache ist ein Teil unseres Organismus und nicht weniger kompliziert als dieser. (14.5.1915)

4.002 Der Mensch besitzt die Fähigkeit, Sprachen zu bauen, womit sich jeder Sinn ausdrücken läßt, ohne eine Ahnung davon zu haben, wie und was jedes Wort bedeutet. – Wie man auch spricht, ohne zu wissen, wie

die einzelnen Laute hervorgebracht werden.

Die Umgangssprache ist ein Teil des menschlichen Organismus und nicht weniger kompliziert als dieser. Es ist menschenunmöglich, die Sprachlogik aus ihr unmittelbar zu entnehmen. [...]

Die stillschweigenden Abmachungen zum Verständnis der Umgangssprache sind enorm kompliziert.

These passages remind us of a certain stream in 19th century linguistics, the so-called *Junggrammatik* school (Schleicher, Meyer, Brugmann and others). This school held that languages resemble organisms in relevant respects, they grow and age, and they reflect certain natural laws, especially those of phonetics. Dichotomies like those of natural/artificial, living/dead languages are products of this school. The *Junggrammatik* combines, among others, the evolution idea of the 19th century with Romanticist ideas of *Volksggeist* and naturalness. Both points, the organism conception of language and the primacy of spoken language, reappear in Wittgenstein, although in a *prima facie* strange coining: Wittgenstein sees all-day language as a *part* of the human organism. However, this coining shows that he made critical use of the organism metaphor.

Nevertheless, the organism metaphor is manifest, and these early texts provide an argument against certain forms of PL: if the tacit conventions needed for understanding everyday language are enormously complicated, then a PL, which must establish all those conventions artificially, is very likely to be shipwrecked. This may give a partial explanation for Wittgenstein's aversions in 1927. However, his high emotional engagement remains unexplained. Why did he regard Esperanto not only as useless, but despicable? And how much did he actually know about it?

In a note of 4 February 1949 (MS 138/p.14b, in: *Wittgenstein's Nachlass: The Bergen Electronic Edition*. Oxford University Press 2000), Wittgenstein writes:

Wer z.B. eine Kunstsprache (Esperanto, Basic English) konstruiert, wird ihre Wörter nach gewissen Gesichtspunkten auswählen, und aus diesen Gesichtspunkten könnte man dann wieder unsre Sprache betrachten. Er könnte z.B. sagen: „Ich werde nicht zwei Wörter, eins für „gehen“, eins für „schreiten“, zulassen, denn für alle wichtigen Zwecke genügt hier ein Wort.“ Und also auch: „'gehen' und 'schreiten' haben wesentlich die gleiche Bedeutung.“

Wittgenstein's overall reasoning in this passage (on the perspective of semantical considerations) is surely correct. But our point here is the parallel mentioning of Esperanto and Basic English, which is highly inappropriate in the light of our above classification. We have seen the radical differences between Basic English as an ethno-language with reduced vocabulary and Esperanto as an autonomous selection language. What Wittgenstein describes here, is probably true of Basic English, but surely not of Esperanto. There, the verbs *iri* and *paŝi* of course exist as two distinct verbs. We may take this passage as clear evidence that Wittgenstein's acquaintance with Esperanto must have been rather superficial. We may presume that Wittgenstein was considerably familiar with Basic English² via C.K. Ogden, and maybe he thought (erroneously) that Esperanto had a similarly reduced vocabulary. – With this in mind, we read the famous *CV* passage more critically:

Esperanto. Das Gefühl des Ekels, wenn wir ein *erfundenes* Wort mit erfundenen Ableitungssilben aussprechen. Das Wort ist kalt, hat keine Assoziationen und spielt

² In view of the label „Kunstsprache“ for Basic English, one might doubt even this. However, the terminology in the 1940s was much less settled than today.

doch „Sprache“. Ein bloß geschriebenes Zeichensystem würde uns nicht so anekeln.

Clearly, the invented character of Esperanto still seems to be Wittgenstein's main worry and clearly his verdict concerns the whole language (and not only the few invented parts of it, which admittedly exist). But we saw before that Esperanto is not "invented" in the same sense as Volapük was. Not only for Esperantists, but for many European speakers, especially with a Romance background, many Esperanto words are immediately understandable. This is further evidence that Wittgenstein's views about Esperanto cannot have been based on broad knowledge.

As Wittgenstein puts it, Esperanto appears as a highly artificial device with poor prospects to function. At this point we may ask how much of the Esperanto movement between the wars Wittgenstein actually perceived. In August 1924 (i.e. the year when Wittgenstein himself was involved in a sort of language engineering: he was preparing his *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen*), the 16th Esperanto World Congress took place in Vienna. The event with 3400 participants found broad public attention. The Austrian National Library keeps a valuable collection of more than 50 newspaper clippings which display a rich and rather friendly echo in the East-Austrian press. Key themes in the coverage were the actual functioning of Esperanto, its increasing introduction in China and other countries, the 60 policemen with white/green armlets who had taken voluntary Esperanto lessons and served as congress guides, and a celebrated performance of Ferdinand Raimund's *Der Verschwendter* in Esperanto in the *Bürgertheater* with prominent Viennese actors. Only a few conservative journalists brought forth well-known objections: Esperanto is not organically grown, it sounds ugly and is the road to an undesired cultural blend, it is a sort of sacrilege to translate a typical Viennese author like Raimund into such a language, etc. Some more profound articles raised the question which was the main theoretical topic of these days: whether Esperanto was bound to decay into different languages or not. It is hard to imagine that Wittgenstein, who spent the summer of 1924 partly in Vienna and partly at the Hochreit holiday house, did not, at least indirectly, notice anything of that. Nevertheless, there is no evidence for it. The debates in 1927 show that he was still not convinced of Esperanto's functioning, that his problems with Esperanto were not the main theoretical problems of his time, and that his reservations have more in common with the long shadow of the organicity thesis.

But there another important point in the 1946 passage: it is the lack of associations which is responsible for the coldness and disgusting appearance of Esperanto words. Such words just "play at being 'language'", i.e. there is something *essential* missing in Wittgenstein's view. He sometimes seems to consider an increasingly emotional, "connotationalist" account of language which is not easy to reconcile with the usual view of meaning as use. We remember that Carnap had diagnosed some emotional component in the matter already in 1932. A passage from 1936 marks a further station on the way.

Wenn wir uns fragen; worin besteht der Eindruck, den uns ein Wort macht, so denken wir zuletzt an das, was wir sehen, wenn wir das Wort anschauen. Wir nehmen an das Bild des Wortes selbst sei ziemlich nebensächlich und der Eindruck liege irgendwie hinter dem Wortbild. Und diesen Fehler machen wir immer wieder. Aber die Gestalt eines Wortes, das wir – wie alle Wörter der gewöhnlicher Sprache – unzählige male gesehen haben, macht uns einen tiefen Eindruck. Denke nur an die Schwierigkeiten, die wir empfinden wenn die Recht-

schreibung geändert wird. Solche Änderungen sind als Sakrileg empfunden worden. Freilich nur gewisse Zeichen machen uns einen tiefen Eindruck, andere nicht. Ein neu erfundenes Zeichen etwa "v" für oder kann ohne in uns etwas aufzuregen durch ein beliebiges anderes ersetzt werden. Denke daran daß das [geschriebene] gesehene] Wort uns in ähnlicher Weise vertraut ist wie das gehörte. Denke an Esperanto und wie seltsam es uns anmutet einen Ausdruck der Herzlichkeit in diese Kunstsprache übersetzt zu hören. Wir könnten ja auch nicht der Händedruck willkürlich durch ein anderes Zeichen ersetzen. Das hängt damit zusammen, daß wir uns das Gefühl der Trauer als etwas hinter den Empfindungen des Weinens, schweren Atmens etc. etc. vorstellen und diese geneigt sind als etwas Nebensächliches zu vernachlässigen. (MS 150/p.1)

In a diary entry of 8.2.1931 (*Denkbewegungen*, p.39), Wittgenstein had warned himself away from a sentimental approach to language. Nevertheless, the 1946 passage indicates that such emotional and associative aspects were becoming more and more important for him.

Be that as it may: From the linguistic standpoint, Wittgenstein's views are again misguided. There is no doubt that Esperanto words bear emotional and associative connotations, at least for the Esperanto speaker, but many of them for outsiders as well. The existence of Esperanto native speakers and poetry is one witness among many. This has simply to do with Esperanto's character as selection language, which Wittgenstein misunderstood. Wittgenstein's "feeling of disgust" is the diagnosis of an external observer with massive reservations.

3. A tentative interpretation

As there is evidence for Wittgenstein's aversion especially against Esperanto from all periods of his philosophy, we could here have a clue to another point of continuity in his work. However, there are also indications of slight shifts. It appears as if the initial idea of organicity lost influence in favour of an emotional, "connotational" account of language. But this question goes beyond the scope of this paper.

From an interlinguistic point of view, Wittgenstein's views on planned languages were clearly misguided. Why Wittgenstein made so little or no use of the many occasions to get into a deeper acquaintance, especially with Esperanto, must remain open here. However, deep-rooted emotional factors seem to have played an important role.³

4. References

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