

DANIEL SALOMON TALKS TO SHUMON BASAR

Daniel Salomon is an artist living and working in Berlin who can speak Esperanto fluently. He has employed the universal language in several performances and lectures. Shumon Basar asks him (in the dying language of English) about the utopian roots of Esperanto, and why how you say something is sometimes more important than what you say it with.

SHUMON BASAR: Who invented Esperanto and when?

DANIEL SALOMON: Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof. He was born in 1859 in Białystok, now Poland, in the Russian empire. He'd worked on his universal language ever since he was a teenager, but it was only in 1887 that he published *Unua Libro* – meaning “first book” – thus introducing Esperanto to the world.

SB: It's easy to characterise it as a novelty language – like Klingon for example – but originally its aspirations were very serious?

DS: A widely spread misconception is that it is not a real language because it is not a “natural” language. People think ethnic languages – and especially their own mother tongue – are superior because they have evolved organically over hundreds of years. I think they feel threatened by the idea of a constructed language because language, culture and identity are so closely connected in their unconscious mind. I've been in many heated discussions on the topic. The truth is that Esperanto is a fully functioning language. It is suitable for poetry, humour, feelings, science, contracts or whatever you want to use a language for. Zamenhof was an idealist. He created Esperanto believing an efficient international auxiliary language would contribute to peace in the world. Some practitioners still share this dream. But you're right; most often people just see it as a weird hobby.

SB: What kind of world was Esperanto born into, and what kind of world do you think it originally imagined? Something post-colonial? Post-empire? Utopian?

DS: Zamenhof grew up in a very violent place. At that time in Białystok there were four ethnic communities: Jews, Germans, Poles and Russians, all hating each other. Zamenhof believed their conflicts stemmed from the language barrier, so he decided to create a common neutral language for them all. It carried values such as progress, tolerance, internationalism, and so on. In that sense it is a typical modernist Utopia. Nowadays people speak Esperanto for different reasons (during travel is one), but a common view is that speaking Esperanto is a peaceful act of resistance against global homogenisation and American cultural imperialism.

SB: When you say that Esperanto is “neutral”, what does that mean?

DS: Esperanto does not belong to any country or culture. For me, it is really a liberating experience to speak it. I can recommend it to anyone. I've been to several Esperanto congresses. It's like being in the UN, but without the interpreters,

the headphones, and so on. English is not as universally mastered as many people assume, and it's definitely not neutral. Native speakers will always be the witty ones around a table. Imagine a discussion between an Iranian, a Brazilian, a Japanese, a Ghanaian, a Swede and an American with no language barrier between them. That's what Esperanto allows.

SB: Has it also mutated over time, like all other languages? Is there an official governing body that regulates it?

DS: Esperanto is alive and therefore evolves all the time. I would not use the word mutate, though. The DNA of Esperanto is still the same. Zamenhof prescribed 16 fundamental rules defining the language (all nouns end with o, adjectives



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SB: What are the building blocks of the language?

DS: A fair critique against Esperanto is that it is made up mainly from European languages. But let's not forget that Zamenhof did an amazing job putting Latin, Greek, French, Italian, English, German, Polish and Russian together. It would be impossible to devise a functioning language integrating every language in the world. It wouldn't work. Esperanto is easy to learn. Studies have shown it's 10 times faster to learn Esperanto than English, for instance.

tives with a, and so on). It is in no one's interest to mess with those. And because it is so easy to create new words (Esperanto is highly agglutinative), the language adapts very well to its time. There is an official Esperanto Academy supervising the yearly edition of the reference dictionary but I don't think their role, as language police, is so influential.

SB: You deliver lectures entirely in Esperanto. Why do this, and what kind of effects has it produced on audiences?

DS: As much as I love Esperanto, my practice as an artist is not really about promoting the language. My lectures in Esperanto to non-Esperanto speakers can be seen as allegories of Utopia today. Esperanto is meant to be universal but is, in fact, spoken by very few. Basically people don't understand what I'm saying. The allegory is a bit sad maybe. What is more positive is that a communication beyond language appears between the audience and me. I draw on the flip chart and mime actions to illustrate what I'm saying. Body language is very important. The main point is not the content of my lecture; my aim is to create awareness about the situation I share with the audience. To be a teacher is a powerful and vulnerable position at the same time.

SB: What are some of the other ways you have utilised this language as an artist?

DS: It all started as a collaboration with another artist called Olof Olsson. We used Esperanto as a paradigm to imagine a post-national world. We looked at different well-known phenomena from our late capitalist globalised world and reinterpreted them with what we defined as “Esperanto aesthetics and ethics”. We launched an Esperanto football team, an Esperanto fast food restaurant, an Esperanto sitcom, an Esperanto sausage company and much more. I am now working on an Esperanto religion.

SB: In this new religion, what will be the main article of faith?

DS: It will draw inspiration from many existing religions and philosophies. Just like Esperanto, it will be a syncretism. At the moment I am very into Michel Onfray's *Hedonism*: “Taking pleasure yourself and pleasuring others, without harming yourself or anyone else.” That could be the main belief.

SB: Can you imagine a time when Esperanto will eclipse English? Will it become a “world language”?

DS: I think English will decline a bit, but not because of Esperanto. Demography and economy are, of course, the big game-changers. People chose to learn Esperanto; they are not forced into it. That's the beauty of Esperanto but also its weakness. In order to become the world language the community should first reach the critical mass of speakers, which would make learning Esperanto a necessity rather than an idealistic choice. Either it would need some kind of king of the world to make Esperanto compulsory in all schools everywhere – a bit like Russian was imposed in communist countries during the cold war. Or it would need a financial incitement; if there was business to be done through Esperanto, I'm sure people would learn it. But right now I don't see Esperanto taking over anytime soon.

SB: I'd like to say “goodbye” and “thank you” in Esperanto. Can you help me out?

DS: Ĝis revido kaj dankon.