

IDA STRIA

## Language attitudes among Esperanto speakers

**Abstrakt (Postawy językowe użytkowników esperanto).** Esperanto jest planowym międzynarodowym językiem pomocniczym, skonstruowanym przez L.L. Zamenhofa i wydany w 1887 r. Mimo że został stworzony, aby ułatwić komunikację międzynarodową, stał się narzędziem samoidentyfikacji. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu opisanie postaw językowych, które formują się w esperanckiej wspólnocie językowej oraz wykazanie, że te postawy kształtują tę społeczność.

**Abstract.** Esperanto is a planned international auxiliary language, constructed by L.L. Zamenhof and published in 1887. Although created to facilitate international communication, it has become a tool of self-identification. This paper aims to describe language attitudes formed in the Esperanto speech community and to demonstrate that these attitudes shape the community.

### Introduction

Esperanto is an international auxiliary language initiated in 1887. Over the years it has developed into a full-fledged language with a robust speech community (see Blanke 2001; Duličenko 2001; Stria 2015). Esperanto speakers use it not only as a simple mode of intercultural communication; they develop the language and form their identity through it.

This paper deals with some aspects of this community, discussing language attitudes and their consequences for the speakers. It is argued that Esperanto, in the beginning meant to serve as a language to ease international communication, is no longer primarily so used. Although Esperanto speakers very often boast knowledge of more than one native and various foreign languages, Esperanto itself is usually not counted among “foreign” languages, but rather as a means of self-identification. This is visible in proficiency levels, usage, linguistic awareness, as well as extra-linguistic attitudes of the speakers towards languages.

As the community has not been intensively studied so far, it is worth taking a closer look at several studies which might shed some light on the characteristics of Esperanto communication. The article is based mainly on several linguistic and sociolinguistic studies, which, however difficult to compare, allow for a broad description of language attitudes of Esperanto speakers and how these attitudes mold the speech community.

The studies consulted are<sup>1</sup>:

- Fiedler 2002: a 1995 survey on phraseology (528 respondents, subscribers to *Esperanto*, a monthly magazine of the Universal Esperanto Association)
- Koutny 2010: a questionnaire pertaining to the linguistic worldview of Esperanto speakers, administered in 2004 (100 respondents)
- Alòs i Font 2012: a 2007 survey on the identity of Catalan Esperantists (131 questionnaires were collected and 98 used in the overall analysis; however the remaining questionnaires were also consulted in some cases)
- Galor & Pietiläinen 2015: “UEA in the consciousness of Esperantists”, a 2009 sociological survey (386 participants) in connection with the 94<sup>th</sup> World Esperanto Congress in Białystok, Poland
- Caligaris 2016: two sociolinguistic surveys on the linguistic identities of Esperanto speakers which took place in Castelsardo during the International Youth Festival (28 respondents) and in Fai della Paganella during the Italian Congress of Esperanto (65 respondents) in 2014
- Stria 2016 (henceforth *Lille-15*): conducted in 2015 during the 100<sup>th</sup> World Esperanto Congress in Lille, France and through the mailing lists of Interlinguistic Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland (32 advanced Esperanto speakers including two native speakers)
- *Eurojos-17*<sup>2</sup>: a now on-going online survey by Koutny and Stria; there were responses to the questionnaire by 42 upper-intermediate and advanced Esperanto speakers (one native speaker) by December 2017

## 1. Knowledge of languages

The present analyses focus on the languages of the speakers, their level and usage. The self-assessment data is partly collated with real-text data from open-ended questions to verify the speakers' competence.

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<sup>1</sup> The surveys are not directly comparable because of different sample sizes and methodologies. In addition some data is not available for comparison.

<sup>2</sup> Two persons did not mark Esperanto among their languages (either as a foreign or as a native language). This mistake resulted in their not being able to answer the questions pertaining to their usage of Esperanto.

### a. Learning variables: background

Studies show that Esperanto speakers have a higher educational level than the average population. For example, Alòs i Font (2012) states, that 53% of Catalan Esperantists are university graduates. The results of Stria's two pilot studies confirm this claim. All the informants were formally educated: in Lille-15 there were 30 respondents with higher education and only two with just secondary school, while in Eurojos-17 there were 38 with higher education and 4 with just secondary school.

Rašić (1994)<sup>3</sup> reported that the most frequent professions were teacher, official, engineer and technician. Also in Alòs i Font's survey (2012) the most notable profession is that of teacher (16%, compared with 1% in the Catalan population). Among the participants in Lille-15 and in Eurojos-17 there were, respectively, a total of 14 and 18 teachers of different kinds. Koutny registered 21 teachers in her 2010 survey (out of 100); however, university teachers were grouped according to field, if such was given.

A good deal of the informants had a plurilingual/diglossic/dilalic repertoire at home: 6 out of 32 in Lille-15 and 7 out of 42 in Eurojos-17. The two native speakers of Esperanto in Lille-15 were brought up with 3 varieties. Caligaris (2016) reports 80 mother tongues among the 65 participants in Fai della Paganella and 33 among the 28 participants in Castelsardo (3 native speakers of Esperanto in each survey).

### b. Foreign languages

Multiple surveys attest to a high level of multilingualism among Esperanto speakers. The results of Fiedler (2002: 60) show that Esperanto speakers know on average 3.45 foreign languages in addition to Esperanto. Catalan Esperantists speak on average 4.4 languages (mother tongues and Esperanto included). Caligaris (2016) reports that the respondents declare "broad" multilingualism; they claim knowledge of several languages, but only part of the repertoire is effectively used. The participants in the Castelsardo survey speak 2.43 languages in addition to Esperanto, while those of Fai della Paganella 2.09. Stria's two surveys show similar outcomes<sup>4</sup>: Lille-15 2.31, Eurojos-17 2.02 (3.25 and 3.02 respectively including Esperanto; see also figures 1 and 2 below). In Koutny's survey (2010) 93% of the respondents declared knowledge of at least one foreign language beside Esperanto, with 34% of languages being outside their language family.

The most widely spoken foreign languages are English, French and German (Fiedler 2002, Caligaris 2016, Stria 2016). This clearly demonstrates that Esperanto speakers could communicate in an ethnic foreign language and that their motivation "to learn

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<sup>3</sup> The book was published in 1994 but invokes much earlier studies. It is useful for comparisons; however, due to the changing ideology of the community, it can no longer accurately portray the current state.

<sup>4</sup> I have only counted languages with declared competence being at least at the B1 level. Should lower levels be included, the numbers would be higher.

and apply the planned language is not simply restricted to the practical need of having an efficient means of communication” (Fiedler 2006), but rather has social and ideological roots. This was investigated by Caligaris (2016), who asked questions about the motivation to learn foreign languages and Esperanto, the planned language’s relation to natural languages and Esperanto identity. Usage and attitudes will be taken up at a later point in the paper.

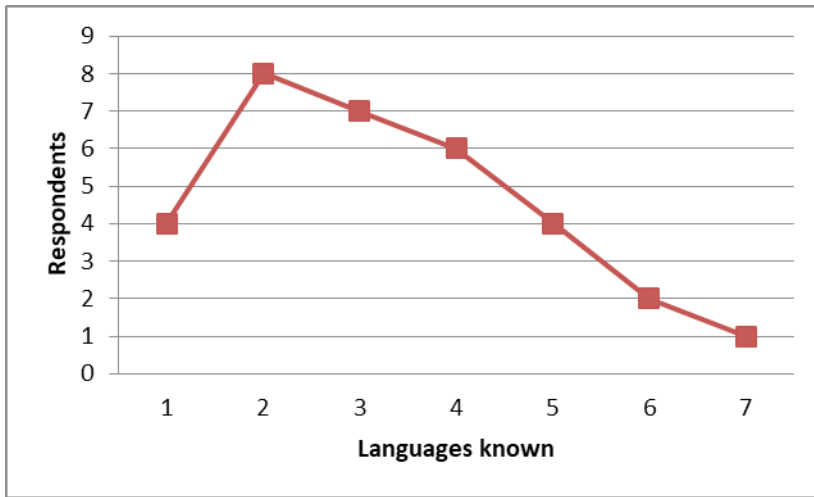


Figure 1: Lille-15. Knowledge of languages (including Esperanto)

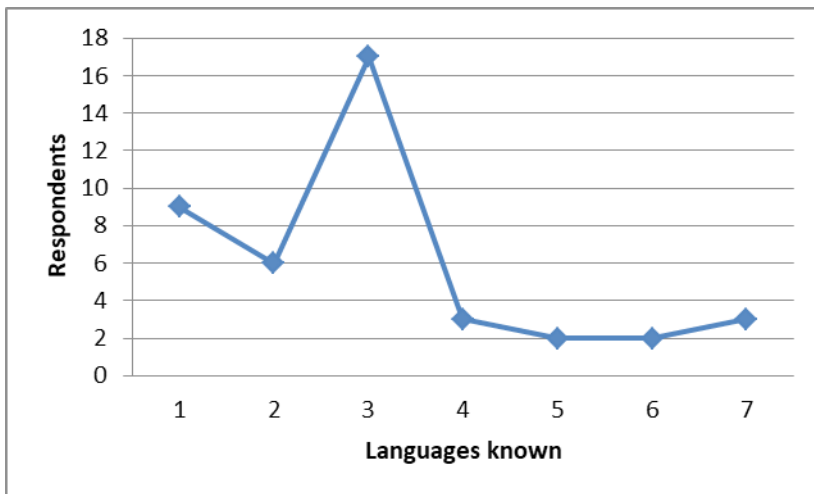


Figure 2: Euroj0s-17. Knowledge of languages (including Esperanto)

### c. Proficiency in Esperanto: declared vs. de facto competence

Participants in Esperanto-related surveys tend to declare a high level of linguistic competence. In Fiedler's survey (2002) as many as 91.2% of the respondents reported speaking the planned language well (*mi bone parolas*). 23.6% considered Esperanto to be one of the languages they use daily. All participants in Koutny's study (2010) assessed themselves as having at least an intermediate level of knowledge and claimed to use the language no less than several times a month. In Lille-15 31 participants declared at least C1 level in some areas (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Only one person (a native speaker of Esperanto) declared a lower overall level. In Eurojos-17 most participants assessed themselves as having advanced (C1-C2) knowledge. Only four persons declared being at an intermediate level. Over 85% of participants in Caligaris' (2016) surveys placed themselves at an intermediate or advanced level.

Alòs i Font's (2012: 37) results are of special interest: little more than half the respondents claimed that they spoke Esperanto well or very well. At the same time, the highest level was found among the activists (89% spoke well or very well).

The competence levels seem to be high. However, there is reason to believe that Esperanto speakers tend to overstate their linguistic skills, also when reporting on their knowledge of Esperanto. As Fiedler (2002: 58) remarks: „for reasons of propagation the language is often described as very easy to learn and Esperanto speakers tend to be embarrassed by admitting non-fluency”. Caligaris (2016: 446) writes that in both her surveys two phenomena are observed: a high interest in foreign languages and a self-confident desire to show one's competence.

The respondents evaluate themselves as intermediate or advanced but at the same time make various mistakes. This would suggest that being fluent is not necessarily associated by them with correctness but rather with communicative skills. The results of Caligaris' and Stria's surveys show that grammar errors, spelling mistakes and vocabulary holes are not uncommon.

For example, in Lille-15 the participants were asked to supply the colour of a fox; the number of colours similar enough to be coded as 'russet/ginger' (8 different) might indicate that many Esperantists simply do not know the term in Esperanto (i.e. *rufa*, given only 3 times; one person explicitly wrote she lacks the term in Esperanto). Some used terms non-existent in Esperanto: *salato* (incorrect for 'lettuce', which in Esperanto is *laktuko*), *dovo/palomo* (incorrect for 'pigeon', *kolombo*) or *ruĝarbo de Kalifornio* ('redwood', *sekvojo*). The grammatical mistakes included no accusative ending or use of the plural instead of the singular form (lack of congruence).

Caligaris (2016: 446) attested the absence of the accusative and omissions of the subject. Most of those errors were found among Italian speakers as an instance of a negative transfer from the mother tongue. She nevertheless rationalises these errors:

However, I believe that these cross-linguistic errors can be classified as post-systematic because, if the beginners are excluded, it is very unlikely that the subjects are not aware of these rules: if anything they neglect them, perhaps due to the low active use of the language for long periods<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations translated from the original by the author.

Many errors are attributable to mother tongue interference. Nevertheless, some could attest to a lower overall level than that declared (i.e. vocabulary holes or congruence errors).

## 2. Usage

Language skills of Esperanto speakers differ as does the type of usage and linguistic attitudes. Although some admit their Esperanto is flawed, they still regard their skills not only as sufficient but also as advanced. In Lille-15 and Eurojos-17 detailed questions about the actual usage of Esperanto allowed for controlling – at least partly – the validity of the respondents’ self-assessments.

Participants in Lille-15 and Eurojos-17 were asked how often they used their languages. Most use Esperanto daily (19 [59%] and 31 [74%] respectively), the second place answer was “several times a week” (8 [25%] and 5 [12%] respectively).

The numbers are partly reinforced by the answers to further questions. In Lille-15 seven persons admit to listening to the radio and/or watching TV in Esperanto (which is a surprisingly large number, given the scarcity of Esperanto medium programmes). More participants read for pleasure in this language (68%) than in English (with only two native speakers of Esperanto and English). Teen read for work (however, 18 do so in English). As many as 28 write to friends and 23 write formally. A total of 29 use Esperanto in conversations and 26 do so on the Internet (again, more than in English, the numbers being 14 and 18; see Figure 14). Some of the numbers are almost as high as in case of native languages (Figure 3).

In Eurojos-17 33 participants (78%) declared reading and writing for fun in Esperanto (only 10 in English; with one Esperanto native speaker and no native speakers of English). Formal reading and writing is done in Esperanto (28 [66%]) and in English (20 [47%]). As many as 31 persons use Esperanto in conversations and 35 on the Internet (English only 11 and 21).

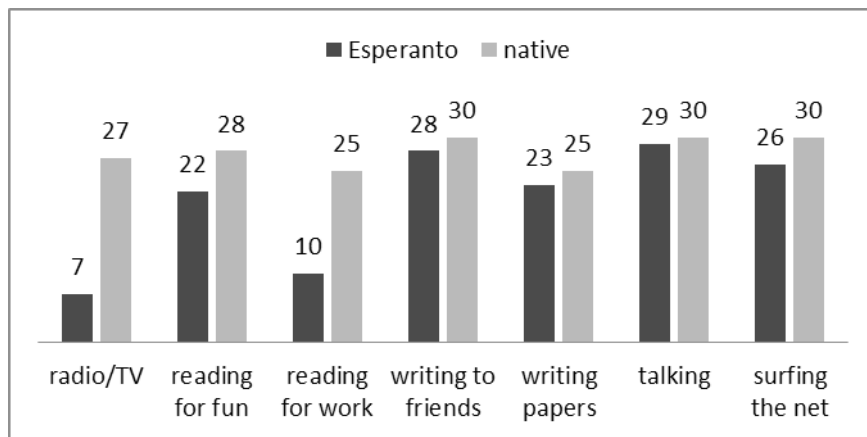


Figure 3: Usage of Esperanto vs. native languages by activity (Lille-15)

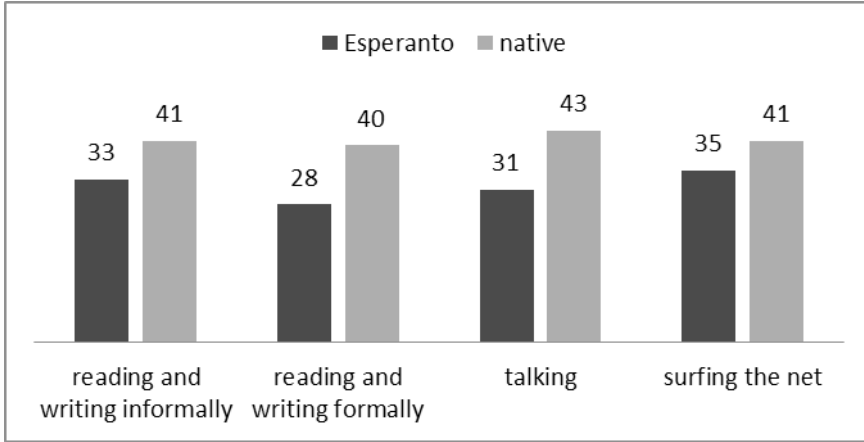


Figure 4: Usage of Esperanto vs. native languages by activity (Eurojos-17)

Studies suggest that Esperanto functions primarily as a means of informal communication (Fettes 1996; Caligaris 2016; Stria 2016 and Eurojos-17; nowadays more and more through modern media, such as telecom software and social media); according to Fiedler’s study the written mode predominates (Fiedler 2002: 60).

The participants in Lille-15 and Eurojos-17 were also asked to assess in which language they most often count and do simple arithmetic and express feelings. Esperanto had the highest count in expressing feelings, which is undoubtedly connected to the fact, that it is mostly used in informal communication (see Figure 5).

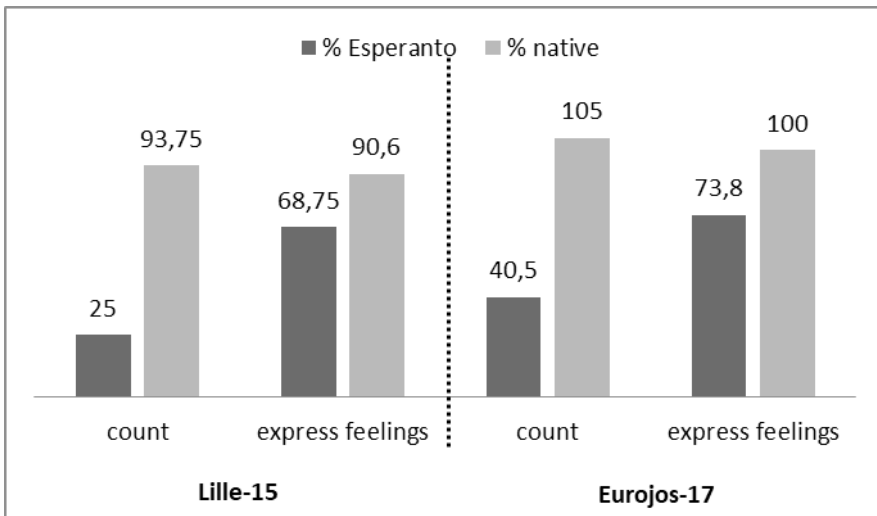


Figure 5: Usage of Esperanto vs. native languages by activity (in %; multiple native languages possible)

Caligaris asked respondents to assess how often they engage in writing, reading, listening to radio and listening to songs (all activities pertaining to Esperanto only). A total of 25 participants (89%) write in Esperanto often or sometimes and 21 (75%) read in it. The numbers for Fai della Paganella are 60 (92%) and 62 (95%), respectively.

Visibly, the respondents use Esperanto quite often and in diverse fields. Basic activities take place mostly in native languages, although Esperanto is always in second place (that is, before other foreign languages).

Both Eurojos-17 and Caligaris (2016) asked about modern media and Internet-based activities. The first asked about these summarily (*On scale 1-5, to what extent are you engaged in the following Esperanto-related activities: correspondence, contributions to e-mailing lists and forums*). Fourteen participants chose 3 “average” (33%); 4 “much” and 5 “very much” were chosen by 9 persons each (21%). The second one was more specific: in Q26 participants answered how often they wrote blogs and e-mail, texted and talked on the telephone, while in Q37 they were asked if they used Esperanto in social media, telecom software/instant messaging, blogs and forums, local groups and international meetings.

The Castelsardo respondents wrote in blogs and forums (21% daily, 32% several times a week) as well as e-corresponded quite often (42% daily, 25% several times a week). As many as 78% declared that they used Esperanto in social media (22 out of 28) and 71% in telecom software/instant messaging (20). The Fai della Paganella respondents used blogs and forums less often (25% several times a day, 10% daily) but e-mail counts are similar: 41% daily, 26% several times a week. Only 55% used Esperanto in social media (36 out of 65). This might be easily explained by age difference in these two surveys. The Castelsardo survey took place during a Youth Congress with an average age of 37, while Fai della Paganella was an Italian Congress of Esperanto, with an average age of 61.

Traditional face-to-face forms of communication were preferred both in Caligaris’ and in Stria’s surveys. A total of 93% of the Castelsardo participants used Esperanto at international meetings (26), while those in Fai della Paganella did so in local groups (48 [74%]) and at international meetings (57 [87%]). In Eurojos-17 26% of the respondents answered that their participation in congresses and local meetings was average (11), 31% was “much” engaged (13) and 19% “very much”.

### 3. Attitudes

#### a. Plurality of languages

As shown, Esperanto speakers display a high level of multilingualism. Many are simply interested in learning languages (50% in Castelsardo and 61% in Fai della Paganella; more than one response allowed). However, one of the major reasons for



learning Esperanto as a foreign language is the ideology lying behind it. Half of Catalan Esperantists stated that they agreed with the idea behind Esperanto, while only 17% began to study Esperanto because they like languages in general (Alòs i Font 2012: 35; only one main reason was supposed to be given).

From its beginnings the planned language attracted people believing in peace and humanism. In his 1912 congress speech the creator of Esperanto, Ludwik Zamenhof, promoted Esperanto as a language with the aim of removing barriers between peoples and to promote fraternity (which is called the internal idea, or, *interna ideo*, of Esperanto).

Today, the original utopian form of the internal idea is not as alluring as it once was. Esperanto is nevertheless strongly connected to ideals promoting justice, equality and peace. According to Pietiläinen (2010), the ideological change began in the 1960s and became visible in the 70s. The “traditional” ideology of Esperanto as “the international language” has slowly changed into a concept in which more emphasis is placed on equal rights, multilingualism, and the value and preservation of minority languages (Pietiläinen 2010: 781):

The old ideology emphasised “the language problem” [orig. *la lingva problemo*], which was first understood as a lack of understanding because of diversity of languages and which considered the plurality of languages the main reason for this linguistic problem. Following the activation of ethnic political movements outside the Esperanto movement, the traditional ideology was modified in the 1970s and the new ideology culminated in the Prague Manifesto in 1995 [sic].

The Prague Manifesto drafted during the World Esperanto Congress in 1996 was remarkable because it no longer declared Esperanto the sole means of communication and the solution to “the language problem” but presented it as a way to mutual respect in diversity.

In the document it is stated that the Esperanto movement is a movement for democracy, language rights, language diversity and human emancipation. Esperanto itself is to be a bridge language. Most participants in Caligaris’ surveys claim that Esperanto should be widely spoken to facilitate world-wide communication (19/28 in Castelsardo, 50/65 in Fai della Paganella), but at the same time that the planned language is necessary to reduce linguistic inequality (10 and 30 respectively).

In this way, speaking Esperanto and the desire for justice and equality further promote linguistic rights and mutual understanding. The majority of speakers feel the need to protect diversity and believe that Esperanto might also serve as a tool to encourage and support the learning of other languages (Caligaris 2016: 228f, 357f.). They have very positive attitudes towards learning new languages as they claim it opens the learner up to new cultures.

## b. Linguistic awareness

Language ideologies lying behind the eagerness to learn new languages might partially point to a high level of linguistic awareness of Esperanto speakers. A striking feature that confirms this claim even more is their hypercorrectness and critical comments pertaining to the questionnaires themselves. Fiedler (2002) reports that a number of people remarked on supposedly wrong words, constructions and spellings in the introductory texts and the tasks. They corrected also the authentic text samples. This exceptionally developed metalinguistic awareness manifested itself also in Lille-15. Apart from corrective comments, there also appeared remarks which showed a great deal of cultural knowledge. For example, Q8 inquired about a “true” Esperantist; one person specifically divided his response into “typical” and “ideal” quoting Melnikov (1992), who introduces the concept of ‘a typical Esperantist’ (however the concept differs from that of ‘an average Esperantist’).

This might be explained by the fact, as Fiedler (2002: 63) puts it, that “the system of rules in Esperanto is permanently present and can be recalled by the speaker of the planned language”. Stria’s investigation (2016) points also to an outstandingly high level of language loyalty (i.e. a high value ascribed to the language through which one’s identity is formed). The participants in Lille-15 were asked to describe an Esperantist. The self-stereotype emerged as a uniform well-established set of features, which revolved around the language. The most frequent answers (i.e. ‘uses the language’, ‘knows the language well’, and ‘works for the benefit of Esperanto’) corroborated the view of a “true” Esperantist as speaking the language fluently and being active for the benefit of Esperanto and the movement. Q6 required of the respondents to imagine a stereotypical Esperantist and supply a contrasting feature. Those “failing” as “true” Esperantists were the ones, who spoke the language poorly (‘still an eternal beginner’) and were not willing to improve their knowledge.

It is worth mentioning that in several contexts comments appear about the term *fremda lingvo* (‘foreign language’; *fremda* might have negative connotations as ‘alien, unfamiliar’). Esperanto speakers state that Esperanto is not a “foreign” language to them (cf. Fiedler 2002: 64 and Caligaris 2016: 425). The disavowal of the term might indicate that Esperanto serves not only as a simple means of communication but also as language of identification.

## c. Ideological identification

Esperanto speakers identify themselves with the ideology lying behind the emergence of the language in addition to the language itself. Galor and Pietiläinen (2015: 43) write that for 67% the most important reason for continued interest in Esperanto was its ideals, for almost 47% willingness to make the world better through using it and for 46% interest in other countries and people (more than one response was allowed).

According to Caligaris (2016: 211, 331), the respondents participate in the ideals behind the planned language (*mi partoprenas en ĝiaj idealoj*; 16/28 in Castelsardo and 48/65 in Fai della Paganella) and believe that Esperanto might become an international language (*mi pensas ke ĝi povus esti la [sic] internacia lingvo*; 14/28 in Castelsardo and 32/65 in Fai della Paganella). Q18 asked straightforwardly about the identity: *Laŭ vi, eblas konsideri sin Esperantisto ĉar...* (“According to you one can consider oneself an Esperantist because...”). In Castelsardo 12/25 responded that it was sufficient to speak Esperanto, without identifying with its ideals and 13 that one would have to speak it as well as identify with its ideals. The numbers in Fai della Paganella were, on the other hand, much different: 1/3 thought it sufficed to speak Esperanto, while as many as 40 (61.5%) considered it of equal importance to speak it and identify with the ideology behind it (Caligaris 2016: 218, 342).

Whatever the motives of studying Esperanto (apart from idealistic reasons there are also very practical ones, e.g. the desire to travel, make friends, study an artificial language; cf. Caligaris 2016), the speakers form a “voluntary, non-ethnic, non-territorial speech community” (Wood 1979), whose sense of identity is strengthened by the feeling of speaking a low-prestige, minority language. This is reflected in the Rauma Manifesto (1980), in which Esperanto community is presented as a *memelektita diaspora lingva minoritato* (“self-elected diasporic language minority”). Several studies compared Esperanto to minority and diaspora languages (Wood 1979; Kimura 2012; Krägeloh & Neha 2014; Stria 2015b). Some Esperanto speakers think also that Esperanto has certain features of a minority language (low prestige, no land or nation; see Caligaris 2016: 3.3, 4.3). One response from Fai della Paganella particularly echoed the opinions presented in the Rauma Manifesto: “[Esperanto is similar to minority languages] because it does not have a country, an army nor economic power” (*Ĉar ĝi ne havas landon, armeon kaj ekonomian [sic] potencon*).

The high metalinguistic and intercultural awareness of Esperanto speakers has profound influence on their communication patterns. Through their cooperative behaviour and openness they are successful in *lingua franca* communication (Fiedler 2017). The small number of native speakers does not contradict the voluntary nature of the community. Thus, the speakers tend to be lenient towards beginners and encourage their efforts. This, again, increases the feeling of being welcome in the community. As Fiedler (2002: 64) points out: “the Esperanto speakers are, while learning the language, also becoming members of the community and participants in its culture”. Therefore some authors choose to call the community a *quasi-ethnic* one, emphasising the existence of common culture (Melnikov 1992).

On the other hand, the fact that Esperanto speakers tend to describe themselves as a minority makes them an exclusive community. Esperanto then becomes a language of communication *inside* a community rather than a tool of international communication.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper examined linguistic attitudes of the Esperanto speakers. On the basis of data concerning their command and usage of Esperanto and other foreign languages, their language ideologies and linguistic awareness collected in diverse sociolinguistic and linguistic surveys, the paper demonstrates that the ideologies behind Esperanto are a primary factor in shaping the speech community. The speakers' common beliefs and values lay the grounds for in-group (rather than international) communication and the feeling of belonging to a community. Consequently, Esperanto becomes a tool of self-identification.

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