



'SALUTON!': *the surprise return of Esperanto*

In the village of Barlaston, just outside Stoke-on-Trent, a strange language can be heard. A Tudor house here is home to the Esperanto Association of Britain (EAB), which encourages people to learn the constructed language.

Esperanto summer schools were first established in Stoke in 1960. The concept of an easy-to-learn, universal second tongue was energetically promoted, **drawing** prominent speakers to the area. And the city still **bears traces** of its Esperanto history. In the north-east of the city, a row of terraced houses are located on Zamenhof Grove, named after the inventor of Esperanto, L. L. Zamenhof.

The 'inner idea' of Esperanto, Zamenhof once said, was to promote world peace. A doctor born in 1859 in Białystok, now in Poland, Zamenhof grew up at a time when violence between different groups was common. While still a child, Zamenhof hit upon the idea that a constructed second language that was easy to learn and understand would allow people to talk as peers, rather than fight. In 1887, after **tinkering away** for more than ten years, Zamenhof published his ideas in a pamphlet. By 1905, the fundamental rules of Esperanto had been established by a conference of speakers in France and Esperantist groups began popping up across the world.

Tim Owen, education director for the EAB, gives me a crash course in what makes it straightforward. 'Probably the main factor is that you can acquire a huge vocabulary without knowing so many words,' he says. All words ending -o are nouns, an -a ending

is for an adjective, while -e denotes an adverb. He shows me that, for instance, *vidi* – meaning 'to see' – can become *vido* for 'vision', *vida* for 'visual' and *vide* for 'visually', concepts that require different words in English. If you need to find an opposite, you can add the *mal* prefix: *pura* is 'clean', *malpura* is 'dirty'. These building blocks can help speakers learn new words very quickly. The spellings are phonetic, there are no grammatical genders, verbs are strictly regular and the vocabulary is a blend of European languages familiar to many.

The Esperanto course on a popular language-learning app recently reached a million learners worldwide. There's a **dizzying array** of other online options to help would-be learners, too. A few taps on the Amikumu (or 'do the friendly thing') app shows users local Esperantists to chat with, while numerous Facebook groups help beginners with vocab and grammar. Esperanto may have been the brainchild of a Polish doctor in the 19th century, but it has adapted for the 21st.

Simone Davis, a civil servant, began learning Esperanto online to distract her from painful chronic health conditions. She found that even at her most tired or ill, she could manage a lesson on her tablet. 'One lesson easily becomes two or three and before I knew it I was **hooked**,' she says. In just over a year, she learnt more Esperanto than she has French, despite taking French classes for five years.

It's the values **underpinning** the language, as well as its ease, that drew Davis in. Esperanto is 'a symbol of intentional goodwill towards others', she says. Learning the language isn't just a hobby, but a commitment to making connections across borders on a level playing field. I initially write this off as simply a nice sentiment, but there's plenty of practice behind the principle. O'Dunne shows me the *Pasporta Servo*, a pocket-sized directory of Esperantists all around the world. They offer fellow speakers a place to stay in their home country, often completely free of charge. The *Pasporta Servo* led 26-year-old James McMurray, a data engineer, to make learning Esperanto his New Year's resolution several years ago. He had first become familiar with the language while **leafing through** his grandfather's books – he had become an Esperantist while stationed in India during the Second World War. 'I remember growing up and seeing his books in Esperanto, without being able to understand it, and his correspondence with people all over the world who may not speak English and be able to communicate,' McMurray says.

Despite the resolutely internationalist spirit of Esperanto, it's hard to imagine global business being conducted with a **cheery** *Saluton!* Some utopian-minded speakers say its day as a lingua franca will come (*Esperanto* means 'one who hopes' in the language), but most acknowledge that this is unlikely. Mostly it's the omnipresence of English that explains why Esperanto isn't the current **go-to** for international communication. Esperanto is 'neutral' because it is not a national language, but that also means it does not have a state backing its use abroad. 'People having to make a choice will see English as the financially better option,' says 19-year-old Sammy Kennedy, an aspiring photographer. 'However, Esperanto gives you things that English will never be able to give you [such as] a sense of belonging.' He credits the 'accepting and caring' Esperanto-speaking community with helping him to overcome loneliness and bullying.

Whether to learn a national language or a constructed one is a debate Kennedy has had with others. But one piece of advice from another Esperanto-speaker stayed with him: 'Learn English if you want to make money; learn Esperanto if you want to make friends.' 'It's one of the truest things I've ever heard,' he says.