

## Interdisciplinary PhD funding application January 2019

### Supervisors

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### Title

Esperanto 4.0: Millennials and the global Esperanto movement in historical and anthropological perspective

Esperanto, the auxiliary and neutral language, is back. Historically and still today, it has been and still is a reflection of crisis. Over the past few years headlines in Europe and elsewhere have been dominated by the sovereign debt crisis across Southern Europe, the Eurozone crisis, migration, and Brexit. As a result, populism has risen. Elsewhere, “America first” and the prospect of building a wall on the US-Mexico border dominate headlines in times of Trumpism. For some nationalism, protectionism, unilateralism, and nationalist politics seem to be the antidote against economic global interconnectedness, migration, war, and crisis. Yet underneath dominant media headlines, young people in particular find Esperanto as a means to counter these trends. To them, Esperanto is a means to counter nationalism, inward-looking politics, and mechanisms of social and political exclusion.

As these barriers to cultural understanding increase, so too are they being undermined. Today’s millennials, the **key research focus of this project**, are the first generation that can be described as having grown up in a digital and in many ways unprecedented interconnected world, economically, socially, in terms of communication and media. Interestingly, and under-researched, a significant number of them have found and revived Esperanto. They flock to summer programmes. They learn the artificial and neutral language online via “Duolingo”, lernu.net, and connect via social media across the globe. They join local clubs and attend international Esperanto conventions. They embrace key ideas behind Esperanto: humanism, cross-cultural understanding, sharing ideas for a peaceful future, based on Esperanto as a neutral common ground for communication. Numbers are hard to pin down and little to no research has been done on this latest Esperanto revival.<sup>1</sup>

This **innovative and original cross-disciplinary project is the first of its kind**: researching and understanding the motives and rationals shared by Millennial Esperanto speakers in a historical and anthropological perspective. **The questions** that will guide the research are the following:

- To what extent are current Esperanto-speakers driven by similar or different agendas and ideals as previous generations of Esperanto-speakers?

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<sup>1</sup> Research on Esperanto has mainly been done from a linguistic perspective as well as in historical perspective. As it is less of importance here, we omit the linguistic side of it. On historical aspects, in particular the early decades between 1880s-1930s, see for instance: Schor, Esther. *Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the Dream of a Universal Language*. Henry Holt and Company, 2016; Künzli, Andreas. *L.L. Zamenhof (1859-1917): Esperanto, Hillelismus (Homaranismus) und die “jüdische Frage” in Ost- und Westeuropa*. Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010; Lins, Ulrich. *Dangerous Language — Esperanto and the Decline of Stalinism*. Springer, 2017; Janton, Pierre. *Esperanto: Language, Literature, and Community*. SUNY Press, 1993; Garvia, Roberto, and Roberto Garvía Soto. *Esperanto and Its Rivals: The Struggle for an International Language*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

- To what extent are current speakers aware of the historical origins and the legacy of the language and the broader movement?
- How do millennials interact within the wider Esperanto community in comparison to previous generations (travel, congresses, local and national societies, media and online forums)?
- To Millennial Esperantists, what are the limits and potentials to revive the movement within the current social, economic, political, and cultural climate?

The **main focus of the project** is to conduct **ethnographic fieldwork**, in form of meetings, informal and formal interviews and oral history, regarding Millennial Esperantists. While the focus is on the current resurgent interest in Esperanto and the wider movement, we envision the **project to be underpinned by historical questions** and an awareness of the history of the movement, past and present motives and rationale for people to learn the language and join the movement. We expect the focus on Millennial Esperantists to be informed and partially driven by **diachronic comparisons** with earlier generations of Esperanto activists (see historical background below). While it is obvious that the early generations of Esperantists (c.1880s-1930) were driven by an agenda of transnational activism and internationalism, this may (or may not) be the case with the millennial generation.

Since its inception in the later 1880s, Esperanto has seen as many deaths as it has seen comebacks. The latest one among millennial may be unsurprising given the language's historical origins. When the Polish doctor Ludwik L. Zamenhof introduced this easy-to-learn artificial language in Tsarist Russia around 1887/8, nationalist tensions were running high. As a Jew Zamenhof himself witnessed the pogroms that killed hundreds of Jews in Tsarist Russia in 1881/82. Nationalism, not just in Russia but elsewhere in Europe, was a product of and a reaction against the rapid process of globalisation around 1900.

At the time, English had not yet reached its status as a global lingua franca. French was arguably in decline, German – in particular in the sciences and technology – had become an important language, yet it would never achieve a global status. In times of globalisation, standardisation, rapid communication (e.g. telegraphy, steam ships, mass media) around 1900 Esperanto was quickly embraced by tens of thousands of speakers. What set Esperanto apart from a number of competing auxiliary, planned, neutral languages (e.g. Volapük) were two aspects. First, it was much easier and quicker to learn than other language projects.<sup>2</sup> Second, and crucially, from the start Zamenhof had envisioned that the language should be part and parcel of a broader social movement.

From the very beginnings, Esperantists were networkers across borders. As a consequence, the Esperanto movement spread quickly and it can broadly be divided into **four phases since its inception. First phase 1890s-1914**: During this phase the Esperanto movement found thousands of followers first in Russia, then in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Britain, and elsewhere. By 1910 it was taught in 320 schools in 17 countries and more than 1,200 towns

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<sup>2</sup> Linguists point to the fact that Esperanto, based on the most common Indogermanic words and only 16 grammatical rules, is 5 times easier to learn than English, 8 times easier to learn compared to French. Fluency can be reached within four to five weeks of intense training.

offered evening classes. By 1914 hundreds of local Esperanto clubs and communities had formed across Europe from Bilbao to Uppsala, from Birmingham to Olomouc (Olmütz, Moravia). The annual congresses between 1905 and 1913 attracted some 10,000 Esperanto speakers from Europe and around the world (Japan, China, Latin America). At least at the level of international congresses it was, first, a movement of professionals. Among them were headteachers from Blackpool, railway officers from Olomouc (Moravia), merchants from Hamburg and Genoa, doctors from Helsinki, coffee shop owners from Breslau, lawyers from Edinburgh, engineers from Rzeszow and suffragettes from across Europe. Esperantists founded a number of journals to communicate across borders in fields including science, technology, medicine, and literature.

**Second phase 1918-1930s:** During the interwar years the Esperanto movement spread geographically and socially. Socialists, shopkeepers, railway workers joined the movement. Journals advertised evening classes for middle-class women. Women's rights advocates and anti-imperialists continued to join the movement. Annual congresses attracted Esperantists in the thousands. The movement had strong links to formal internationalism (e.g. League of Nations, Red Cross). Both the Nazi regime and Stalin in the Soviet Union, however, cracked down on the movement in the 1930s. Esperantists were persecuted in both countries (as well as in Franco Spain), ended up in Gulags and concentration camps due to the movement's internationalism, its socialist and Jewish roots. Elsewhere, as in the Netherlands, France, Britain, and Scandinavia, the movement kept flourishing during this period.

**Third phase 1960s-1980s:** Esperanto witnessed a third wave or generation during the Cold War. While English was clearly the global language in the period after 1945, the US state department and military complex adopted Esperanto for training and communication purposes for some time. Yet also across the divide of the Iron Curtain, Esperanto flourished in the 1970s-1980s. Compared to the previous two generations, relatively little research exists on this period. It seems that Esperanto served, partly, as a subversive means in smaller nations within the Soviet sphere and empire to undermine Russian influence. While never formally adopted by institutions, think tanks, and research centres, scientists and engineers in particular kept showing a strong interest in the language for easy cross-border, and ultimately, a non-English dominant, neutral ground for knowledge exchange.

**Fourth phase 1990s-2010s: This is the phase on this interdisciplinary project will focus.** The fourth period analyses the most recent resurgent generation of Esperantists: the millennials. There are currently some 2 million Esperanto-speakers worldwide, with some estimated 2,000 native speakers. This generation (born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s) can be regarded as the fourth generation of Esperanto-speakers. **In a historical-anthropological perspective (as outlined above) this project analyses the reasons, the rationale and mechanisms of global interconnectedness of Millennial Esperantists.** To date little research has been done on this generation and its links to Esperanto.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Fians, Guilherme, Die Neutralität einer politischen Partei: Sprachpolitik und Aktivismus für Esperanto (Neutrality of a political party: Language politics and activism for Esperanto). Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Interlinguistik 2018: 11-33.

We are looking for a **PhD candidate** trained in Social Anthropology or History. This could include someone with a joint degree or someone with a Masters and Undergraduate degrees in the disciplines. In order to conduct fieldwork English and Esperanto will be needed (yet the latter can be learned during an early phase of the project, see below).

The student will spend the **first year** preparing a research proposal for **fieldwork in the second year**. This document must satisfy both Schools and be 12-15,000 words in length and includes historiographical and methodological context and be submitted within 12 months of start date. The training will involve learning Esperanto, and its history in Europe and surveying, exploring, and identifying key theoretical themes to be explored. It will also involve identifying millennial Esperanto speakers in parts of the UK and the European mainland. The **main entry point** here are digital and social media: blogs, online fora, social Esperanto clubs. These platforms can be used to identify willing participants for follow-up with questions and longer-term fieldwork.

Training in anthropological methods will also be provided by the ‘pre-fieldwork seminar’ series, which discusses the challenges of doing fieldwork and methodologies with first year PhD students. Students are also advised to audit the ESRC recognised modules in Qualitative Methods and Quantitative Methods (SS5103 and SS5102). Towards end of the first year the student will be required to submit an **Ethics application** for review by both School Ethics Committees and approval from UTREC.

The aim of the **second year** will be to work with about **15 clusters of people** in depth in the UK (and if feasible beyond the UK). The exact number will depend how dispersed the groups are, and how much interaction and distance there is between the clusters. This fieldwork will be conducted face to face with Esperanto speakers and will consider personal motivations, uses of Esperanto, biographical information, education and family background. This data will be collected through conversation, participation observation and formal interviews. Since these millennial Esperantists are likely to have been encouraged by previous speakers the fieldwork will also look at **past generations** and their memories of the contexts and motivations behind learning Esperanto. Again, we would be looking for about **15 individuals** (e.g. one per cluster) to draw in to the project. The fieldwork then is likely to involve considerable moving around between interlocutors in order to establish strong relations. The degree of mobility will be a core methodological challenge of the project.

The final part of fieldwork gathering exercise will be to **explore the European and global connections**, which should emerge from the UK based research. One supervisor is already in contact with a person in Munich as well as Esperantists in the UK.

The **third year** of the PhD will be led by the analysis of the data and writing of the PhD dissertation.