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ESPERANTO: ITS ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY

Abstract. We trace the development of Esperanto prior to the publication of the first book on the language in 1887 and try to explain its origins in a multicultural setting. Influences on Esperanto from several other languages are discussed.

The paper is an elaborated version of parts of the author's lecture in Kraków at the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, Polska Akademia Umiejętności, on December 6, 2006.

1. The first book on Esperanto and its author

The first book on Esperanto (Д^П Эсперанто 1887a) was published in Warsaw in the summer of 1887, more precisely on July 14 according to the Julian calendar then in use (July 26 according to the Gregorian calendar). It was a booklet of 42 pages plus a folding sheet with a list of some 900 morphemes. It was written in Russian. Soon afterwards, a Polish version was published, as well as a French and a German version, all in the same year (Dr. Esperanto 1887b, 1887c, 1887d). The English version of the book appeared two years later, in 1889, as did the Swedish version.

The author of the book was only 27 years old at the time. His complete name, as it is known now, was Lazaro Ludoviko Zamenhof, registered by the Russian authorities as Лазарь Маркович Заменгофъ (Lazar' Markovič Zamengof''). His given name was Eliezyer in Ashkenazic Hebrew, Leyzer in Yiddish, and Лазарь (Lazar') in Russian. Maimon (1978:49) gives them as Eliezer, Lejzer, and Lazar. According to the custom of his time, he later added a Gentile name starting with the same letter, Ludwig.

He was born in Białystok on December 3, 1859 (December 15 in the Gregorian calendar) and lived in the street known in Yiddish as *di yatkegas* 'Street of the Butcher Shop'; in Polish *Ulica Żydowska* 'the Jewish Street'. In 1919 the street was renamed *Ulica Zamenhofa* (Maimon 1978:17).

Białystok was at the time a town in the Grodno Governorate, in Russian Гродненская губерния (Gródnenskaya guberniya) of some 16,544 inhabitants of which 11,288 (68.2%) were Jewish (statistics from 1860; Maimon 1978:19). The others were Poles, Russians, Germans, Lithuanians, and Tatars (Maimon 1978:20). The languages Ludoviko grew up with were Yiddish, Russian, Polish and German, and then of course Hebrew in the synagogue. The town had an important textile industry, the third after Moscow and Łódź in the Russian empire (Maimon 1978:19).

The family moved to Ulica Nowolipie in Warsaw in December, 1873, when Ludoviko was fourteen.

What was his first language? He wrote in a letter in 1901 that his “parental language” (mother tongue) was Russian, but that at the time he was speaking more in Polish (Zamenhof 1929:523). However, all other evidence points to Yiddish as his mother tongue and first language. In all probability, his mother Libe (Liba) spoke Yiddish and his father Mark spoke Russian to him, perhaps in addition to Yiddish. So one could say that his mother tongue was Yiddish, his father tongue Russian. At any rate, he was (at least) bilingual already in his early childhood.

How could he claim that his first or maternal language was Russian? Did he lie? I think the explanation lies in the fact that he called Yiddish not a language but a “jargon,” or “dialect.” He learnt this language as a small child, but he then wanted to hide the fact, and said that the more prestigious Russian was his first (real) language. We may find this strange, but in his efforts to make Esperanto accepted as an international language, he felt that it was important not to mention his Jewishness publicly, although privately he was very clear about this. So he lied in some sense, but he did not lie in another sense, with his own definition of the term *language*.

Ludoviko’s father Mark Fabianovič Zamenhof (in Yiddish Mortkhe-Fayvish; in Ashkenazic Hebrew Mordechai, 1837–1907) founded at the age of twenty a private Jewish school in Białystok and also gave private lessons in German and French there. He obtained a position as teacher of Geography and Modern Languages in Białystok (Holzhaus 1969:7). After the move to Warsaw he became employed as a teacher of German in a *Realgymnasium* in Warsaw (Maimon 1978:144). This was rare for a Jew: in Warsaw there were only two other Jewish teachers with a similar position. Most remarkably, he worked since 1878 as a censor under the Czarist regime, censoring newspapers and books in Yiddish and Hebrew (Holzhaus 1969:11). He was not fighting for Jewish nationalism; he was for integration

and assimilation of the Jews, and wanted his children to speak Russian and to adopt Russian customs.

Of course Ludoviko also learnt Polish and German in addition to Yiddish and Russian. As a schoolboy, he studied classical languages. In those days, this term applied not only to Latin and Greek, but included Hebrew and Aramaic as well. Four classical languages! He learnt Hebrew from his father. He learnt French and also English, although his English, in his own words, was not very good. He was probably familiar with Lithuanian, Grodno and Vilnius (Wilno) being the two “Lithuanian provinces” of the Russian Empire. He certainly learnt Volapük, another planned language, which had appeared in 1880, seven years before Esperanto but when he had already begun working on an early variant of the language. So all in all, it is probable that he knew, to various degrees, some fourteen languages: Yiddish, Russian, German, French, Polish (all these he spoke fluently), and then Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Aramaic, English, Volapük; possibly to some degree Italian and Lithuanian, and, most importantly—Esperanto!

At the time when the first book on Esperanto was published, all books in the Russian Empire were censored, and Zamenhof’s book had to pass the censors like any other publication. There were two decisions by the authorities: first the permit to publish, made on the basis of a submitted manuscript, and then, when the book was printed, the permit to release it, made on the basis of a check that the printed version did not deviate from the approved manuscript (Boulton 1980:32).

Zamenhof’s book was allowed to be published on May 21, 1887 (June 2 in the present calendar). The second decision, to release it, was then made on July 14 (July 26 in our calendar; Ludovikito 1982:37). Marc Chagall was born in the same month in Vitebsk, some 500 kilometers from Białystok.

For the Polish version, the second to appear, these dates were July 9 and August 25 (July 21 and September 6). Between these two dates, the author married on July 28 (August 9 in the Gregorian calendar). His wife was Klara Silbernik (1863–1924) from Kaunas (Kowno in Polish). They had met in Warsaw when she was visiting her sister there, although it is not clear exactly when they met (Maimon 1978:116). The year 1887 was indeed a busy one for the author.

I have not been to Białystok¹ but I have been to Kaunas and visited the house where Klara lived. Built in brick, it is still in good shape. The experience of standing in that house was very touching.

¹The wooden house where Ludoviko lived no longer exists; it was torn down by a decision of the *Magistrat* ‘City Government’ in 1959 (Maimon 1978:18).

Zamenhof died in Warsaw on April 14, 1917, at the age of 57, and his body was buried in the Jewish cemetery there.

Dr. Esperanto

The author of the four books was given as Dr. Esperanto. So one started to speak about “the language of Dr. Esperanto,” then “the language of Esperanto,” finally just “the language Esperanto.”

However, it was not difficult to guess who was behind this pseudonym, for the address of the author was given in the first book as:

АДРЕСЪ АВТОРА:
Господину Д^ру Л. Заменгофу
для д-ра Эсперанто
въ ВАРИШАВѢ.

THE AUTHOR'S ADDRESS:
To Mr. Dr. L. Zamenhof
FOR DR. ESPERANTO
in WARSAW.

No street address or zip code was necessary in those days.

2. Czarist Russia

To give you an idea of the situation in Czarist Russia of that time, let me quote from the biography written by Marjorie Boulton, an outstanding Esperanto writer and a member of the Esperanto Academy:

During Ludovic's childhood the 1863 Polish uprising occurred; Białystok was in the province of Grodno, one of the two 'Lithuanian provinces', controlled by the notorious 'Murayev the Hangman', who stifled Polish national aspirations and deadened the schools with stultifying formalism. The Polish University of Warsaw was closed and replaced by a Russian one; in the Lithuanian provinces the use of Polish language was prohibited. (Boulton 1980:4)

Concerning censorship, Georg Brandes (1842–1927), the Danish literary critic and scholar, reports from his visits to Poland in the 1880s and 1890s, and I quote again from the book by Marjorie Boulton:

[...] he found that any book not known to the Customs at the Polish frontier had to be sent to the Warsaw censor; that, when he gave a

public lecture, not only was the text censored in advance, but an official sat in the hall with a notebook to check that the lecturer added nothing new; [...] (Boulton 1980:5)

It is under these circumstances that the four books on a revolutionary new language appeared.

The Jews in Russia were not allowed to live where they wanted. Białystok was situated in the Pale of Settlement, in Russian *черта оседлости* (*čertá osédlosti*), in Polish *strefa osiedlenia*, where Jews were allowed to live. This zone was created by Catherine the Great in 1791 and lasted for 126 years, until 1917. The percentage of Jews was highest in the Warsaw province, 18.12%; second highest, 17.28%, in the Grodno province where Białystok was; and 4.13% in the whole Russian Empire (statistics from 1897; Boulton 1980:5, Wikipedia). In Białystok itself, as already mentioned, the Jews were in majority: 68.2% in 1860, 66% in 1897.

3. Esperanto in Kraków

Since our academy is at home in Kraków, let me mention briefly some activities here.

The *Krakova Societo Esperanto* was founded in 1906. The language reached Kraków not from Warsaw as one could imagine today, but, as a consequence of the partition of Poland, from the south, via Austrian and Hungarian cities (Kostecki 2006:5). During the century 1906–2006 there have appeared eighteen different periodicals in Kraków (Kostecki 2006:14). Of the books that have been published here, let me mention *Podręcznik języka esperanto*, published in nine editions, the first in 1946, by Mieczysław Sygnarski, lecturer in Esperanto at the Jagellonian University, with a preface written by Zenon Klemensiewicz, a renowned linguist, president of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and a professor at the Jagellonian University (Kostecki 2006:16–17).

The yearly Esperanto world congresses started in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, in the year 1905. Two of them have been held in Kraków: in 1912, with 946 participants from 28 countries, and in 1931, with 900 participants.

I think one important reason for the 1912 congress, the eighth in order, to be held in Kraków was that the Austrian rule was less brutal than in other parts of the partitioned country. Only in 1937 was a world congress held in Warsaw, with 1120 participants, and then again in 1959, the centenary of Zamenhof's birth, with 3256 participants. In 1987, Warsaw was host for the centennial congress, with a record number of participants, 5946.

The Esperanto world congress will come back to Poland. In a speech held in Yokohama on August 11, 2007, the Mayor of Białystok, Dr. Tadeusz Truskolaski, invited the 94th Universal Congress of Esperanto to be held in Białystok in 2009, to mark the 150th anniversary of Zamenhof's birth.

4. Zamenhof's attempt at standardizing Yiddish

Let me now take up a less well-known fact from the prehistory of Esperanto.

During two years, 1879–1881, Zamenhof studied medicine at the Imperial University in Moscow; in the fall of 1881 he returned to Warsaw and pursued his studies at the Imperial University there. During his time in Moscow he worked on Esperanto, but also on a Yiddish grammar. The exact period when he was working on that grammar is difficult to ascertain. J. Kohen-Cedek (Zamenhof 1982:6) gives the years as 1879–1882.

Zamenhof felt that Yiddish was split into dialects and not sufficiently standardized. His grammar showed strong standardizing tendencies.

There exist two main dialects of Yiddish, he writes, the “Lithuanian” and the “Polish.” It is however enough to choose one dialect, Zamenhof states, and he chooses the “Lithuanian” to be used in his grammar because its pronunciation is “purer and more correct” (Zamenhof 1982:10, 38).

Birnbaum (1979:94–105) distinguishes three dialects of Yiddish in Europe: West Yiddish (WY), Central Yiddish (CY), and East Yiddish (EY), the latter being subdivided into a northern subdialect (EYN) and a southern subdialect (EYS). The East Yiddish of Białystok belongs to the former; that of Warsaw to the latter. The subdialect EYS in turn is divided into a western part (EYSW), to which Warsaw belonged, and an eastern part (EYSE) (Birnbaum 1979:98).

We may add that the northern subdialect was in minority among speakers of East Yiddish: Birnbaum (1979:99) gives the figures 2,010,000 speakers of the northern subdialect as compared to 5,360,000 for the southern subdialect of East Yiddish.² The speakers of EYN were found also in Riga, Dvinsk, Vitebsk, Kaunas, Vilnius, Minsk, Grodno, and Poltava; the speakers of EYS in a much larger area, stretching from the Baltic Sea in the north over Kraków, Kyiv (Kiev), Lviv (Lemberg) and Szeged to Odessa and Bucharest in the south (Birnbaum 1979:95). There was thus a linguistic boundary between Białystok and Warsaw.

²The figures are estimates on the basis of official population statistics collected at some time during the 1920s or 1930s and on the basis of what was known of the dialect frontiers.

The grammar was written in Russian, since, as Kohen-Cedek (Zamenhof 1982:7) writes, Zamenhof wanted to present it primarily to the assimilated Jews of Russia, those who were not used to speaking Yiddish.

In his grammar Zamenhof abandoned the Jewish alphabet traditionally used for Yiddish and proposed instead a Latin-based alphabet with five extra letters (*ĉ, ĥ, ś, ź, ě*) (Zamenhof 1982:10, 38). This would probably shock Yiddish readers. The proposed alphabet for Yiddish were very much like the one he was using at the time for an early variant of Esperanto, and not far from his alphabet of 1887, where the four letters *ć, ĥ, ś, ź* were replaced by *ĉ, ĥ, ś, ĵ*.

Let me mention one more example of standardization. In German the personal pronouns have a dative and an accusative form: *Ich gebe dir das Buch* ‘I give you the book’ (dative, or indirect object) as opposed to *Ich sehe dich* ‘I see you’ (accusative, or direct object). In Swedish, a Germanic language just like Yiddish (one could say a cousin of Yiddish), this distinction has disappeared, and one says *Jag ger dig boken* ‘I give you the book’ and *Jag ser dig* ‘I see you’ with the same form *dig* [dej] for both the indirect and direct object.

In most dialects of Yiddish this distinction was conserved, as in High German, while in Northeastern Yiddish it was lost, as in Swedish. The young Ludoviko obviously did not like such discrepancies. In his grammar he chose to keep the distinction between the indirect and direct forms: *du, dir, diĥ* (Zamenhof 1982: §24), thus contrary to Northeastern Yiddish usage.

This grammar, written in Russian, was not published at the time, since Zamenhof became convinced, as he was to write in 1901, that his efforts concerning Yiddish had no goal and no future; the jargon was only a purely local and provisional dialect (Zamenhof 2006:46). Only parts of his grammar were published, and then in Yiddish translation much later: in Vilnius in 1909 (Maimon 1978:73).

Just as he wanted to unite the Jews of the Russian Empire in one standardized language, he a little later wanted to unite humanity.

5. Proto-Esperanto

Already in 1878, Zamenhof wrote a poem in a variant of Esperanto called *Lingwe uniwersala*. Together with his guests, who were of different ethnic origins, he sang it at his birthday party on December 5, 1878 (old style; Boulton 1980:15, Zamenhof 2006:25):

Malamikete de las nacjes,
Kadó, kadó, jam temp' está.
La tot' homoze in familje
Konunigare so debá.

(Quoted from Waringhien 1989:23.) In modern Esperanto this would be:

Malamikeco de la nacioj,
Falu, falu, jam temp' estas.
La tuta homaro en familion
Kununuigi sin devas.

In English:

Enmity of the nations,
Fall, fall, it is already time.
All humankind in one family
Must unite itself.

This was already in 1878. Nothing more than this poem is extant. Later, in 1881–1882, he worked on a new version of his language; from that time we have much more specimens and can follow his thoughts on how an international language ought to be constructed.

6. What kind of language is Esperanto?

After these historical remarks, let us turn to Esperanto as it is today. It is a fully developed language, whose speakers are dispersed over the globe. It is appropriate to call them a diaspora. Therefore, Esperanto speakers have been compared, sociologically, to Romani-speakers and Yiddish-speakers.

When it was published in 1887, the language consisted of about 900 roots and affixes, from which 10,000 or 12,000 words could be formed. Today, dictionaries often contain 15,000 to 20,000 roots, from which hundreds of thousands of words can be formed. The language continues to evolve

like any other language. It has been used for virtually every conceivable purpose except for commanding armies. In addition to the second-language speakers, there are some one thousand native speakers of Esperanto.

With today's rapid means of communication, distances mean less and less. However, many people cannot afford international travel, internet connections, or international telephone calls. Even paper letters to other countries can be too expensive. Many Chinese have learned Esperanto, but cannot easily use it for international communication because of these limitations.

What are the typical traits of Esperanto as a language? Maybe the most typical is that the words consist of invariable elements, and that word classes, also known as lexical categories, are clearly marked by endings. Nouns end in *-o*, adjectives in *-a*, derived adverbs in *-e*, verbs in infinitive in *-i*, in the present tense in *-as*, in the past tense in *-is*, in the future tense in *-os*, the same for all verbs. So we have:

Adjective *blua* 'blue': *blua ĉielo* 'blue sky', *La ĉielo estas hele blua* 'The sky is bright blue';

Adverb *blue* 'bluely': *blue verda* 'bluish green';

Noun *bluo* 'blue color': *La bluo de tiu ĉi ĉemizo ne eltenas lavadon* 'The blue [color] of this shirt does not wash well';

Verb *blui* 'to be blue': *hele blui* 'to be bright blue', *La ĉielo bluas* 'The sky is blue'.

This means that to every adjective, there is a corresponding adverb: *telefono* 'telephone'; *telefoni hejmen* 'to phone home'; *telefona katalogo* 'telephone book'; *telefone sciigi* 'to inform by telephone'. Is there an adverb in English formed from *telephone*? Yes, *telephonically* is listed in Webster. But you do not usually say "to inform telephonically," do you? There is an adjective *téléphonique* in French, but is there an adverb *téléphoniquement*? So in these languages, it is not easy to know whether a word exists or not. In Esperanto, if you have a noun, you have also an adjective and an adverb. And you know exactly how to form it.

This also means that from one single word, like *sana* 'healthy', one can create many new words by changing the ending. We have *sano* 'health'; *sane* 'healthily', an adverb; *sani* 'to be healthy'; *Sanu!* 'May you have good health!'. And one can go on, adding other morphemes: *sanigi* 'to heal', *saniga* 'healing', *saniĝi* 'to become well', *malsana* 'sick', *malsano* 'sickness', *malsani* 'to be ill', *malsanulejo* 'hospital', etc.

The idea that the words shall consist of invariable elements (as in Chinese) was, as Zamenhof said in the preface to his first book, entirely foreign to the European peoples. They would have difficulty getting used to that, he wrote, so he adapted this dissolution, or disintegration, of the language to European usage with the result that those who study the language without having read his preface will not notice that the language differs in any way from their mother tongue (Д^р Эсперанто 1887a:12).

As to the stock of words, Esperanto takes them mainly from the Romance languages. That could mean Latin, like *domo* ‘house’ (cf. Latin *domus*) and *prujno* ‘hoarfrost, rime’ (cf. Latin *pruina*), but most often it is the French version of a word that is closest, like *ĉemizo* ‘shirt’ (cf. French *chemise*, Italian *camicia*) and *ĉevalo* ‘horse’ (cf. French *cheval*, Italian *cavallo*).

Some words come from Germanic languages, like *hundo* ‘dog’ (cf. German *Hund* and English *hound*); *birdo* ‘bird’; *pelto* ‘pelt, fur’ (cf. German *Pelz* and English *pelt*, *peltry*).

So, considering the stock of words, there is a majority of them coming from Romance languages, a minority from Germanic languages, and a few from Slavic languages like Russian and Polish. And then a smattering of Greek: *kaj* ‘and’ (cf. Greek *καί, καὶ; kai*) and *brako* ‘arm’ (cf. Greek *βραχίον, brakhíōn*; taken over also by Latin *bracchium*, French *bras*, Spanish *brazo* and Portuguese *braço*).

7. Influences from Polish on Esperanto

There is one obvious trait in Esperanto which comes from Polish and which permeates the whole language: the fixed stress on the penultimate (next to last) syllable. This is remarkable, since the first, unpublished version of the language had mobile stress as in Russian: *Jam temp’ está!* ‘It is already time; let’s get going!’ became *Jam estas tempo!*

Personally I think that a mobile accent makes for better poetry. Indeed, Zamenhof tried out his different versions of the language by translating poems and writing poems himself. This was a most important step in the development of the language—what is a language without poetry? However, in the final analysis, ease of learning was an overriding concern and made him choose fixed stress. Thus *está* ‘is’ of 1878 was replaced by *estas* in 1887, and *kadó!* ‘fall!’ (imperative) by *falu!*

A word which is obviously influenced by Polish is the interrogative particle *ĉu*, from Polish *czy*: *Ĉu vi parolas la polan?* ‘Do you speak Polish?’

in Polish *Czy mówi pani/pan po polsku?*; *Ĉu ne?* ‘Isn’t it?’, *Ĉu?* ‘Really?’. David L. Gold informs me (personal communication 2008-01-03) that Northeastern Yiddish has *tsu* and Southern Yiddish *tsi* with the same meaning. This certainly reinforced Zamenhof’s choice.

8. Influences from Russian on Esperanto

There are some words which are obviously of Russian origin in Esperanto. One is the adverb *nepre* ‘unconditionally, necessarily, definitely’, from the Russian *непременно* with the same meaning. But let us look at a more basic phenomenon.

The plural ending in Esperanto is *-j*: *bela domo* ‘a beautiful house’, *belaj domoj* ‘beautiful houses’; *malgranda muso* ‘a small mouse’, *malgrandaj musoj* ‘small mice’, *blanka ansero* ‘a white goose’, *blankaj anseroj* ‘white geese’. This makes for a lot of *aj*, *oj* in Esperanto. It is believed that the choice of ending was made for the Greek plural ending in words like *logos* ‘word, thought’, *logoi* ‘words, thoughts’; *nautes* ‘sailor’, *nautai* ‘sailors’. This is perhaps the most probable explanation, although N. Z. Maimon pointed out that it could have been the Aramaic *šivto*, *šivtajo* ‘tribe, tribes’ and *gavro*, *gavrajo* ‘man, men’ and many other nouns which inspired Ludoviko early in his life to the plural ending *-j* (Kohen-Cedek 1969:204).

One could also mention plural endings of Lithuanian nouns and adjectives as a possible reinforcement of Zamenhof’s choice of plural ending, for example: *výras*, *výrai* ‘man, men’ or ‘husband, husbands’, in Esperanto *viro*, *viroj* or *edzo*, *edzoj*; *brólis*, *bróliai* ‘brother, brothers’, in Esperanto *frato*, *fratoj*. Here *výras* and *brólis* are two nouns of the first declension.

I would like to offer still another explanation for the choice; I have not seen anyone forward this one. I certainly do not mean that it is the main explanation, but it could have been a contributing factor. In Russian there are ten letters for vowels, usually called soft and hard, five of each kind: *и*, *е*, *я*, *ѐ*, *ю* and *ы*, *э*, *а*, *о*, *у* (*í*, *ĵe*, *ĵa*, *ĵo*, *ĵu* and *y*, *è*, *a*, *o*, *u*).

Esperanto has five vowel phonemes: *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u*. For an ear accustomed to Russian, this sounds a bit dry—one could feel a need to complement them with softer sounds. But a language with ten vowels is hard to learn. A compromise could be to soften words by throwing in a few *j* here and there. In fact, in Esperanto the vowels *e*, *a*, *o*, *u* often appear followed by a *j*, so that they are supplemented by *ej*, *aj*, *oj*, *uj*, where *-aj* appears in adjectives in plural, *-oj* in nouns in plural, and *-ej-* and *-uj-* are common suffixes. So the series *ej*, *aj*, *oj*, *uj*; *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u* in Esperanto actually

mimics the Russian е, я, ё, ю; ы, э, а, о, у. Here the softening, or palatizing, element comes after the vowel, not before as in Russian, but it certainly makes the words sound softer. In addition to the many endings *-aj*, *-oj*, there are several very common words containing *j* in Esperanto: *kaj* ‘and’, *ajn* ‘any’, *ja* (emphatic particle), *je* (indefinite preposition), *ju ... des ...* ‘the ... the ...’.

9. Influences from Yiddish on Esperanto

Latin, French and, to a lesser extent, German, Russian and Polish are the obvious sources for most Esperanto words. It is much less obvious that there is another source, not often mentioned, and not mentioned by Zamenhof himself.

The Esperanto words *hejti* ‘to heat’, *hejmo* ‘home’, *ŝajni* ‘to appear, to seem’, *fajfi* ‘to whistle’ and *fajli* ‘to file’ with the diphthongs *ej* and *aj* are without doubt of Germanic origin. In German, for instance, they are *heizen*, *Heim*, *scheinen*, *pfeifen* and *feilen*, all with *ei*. Why are some of these *ei* rendered by *ej* and others by *aj*? The made-up phrase, *Kial ni hejtas la hejmon sed ŝajnas fajfi pri la fajlado?* ‘Why do we heat the home but seem to neglect filing?’ is the title of an article I published some years ago (Kiselman 1992). Why do we not **hajti la hajmon sed ŝejnas fejfi pri la fejlado?* If one knows only the German language, one cannot guess: the choice between *ej* and *aj* seems to be totally random. Can the origin be the Yiddish language?

David L. Gold writes about *hejmo* and *hejti* in a study (1980:316):

It is hard to believe that Zamenhof would borrow these words from Yiddish and we must therefore link them in some way with German. There is a North German pronunciation of *heizen* with *ej*, but Zamenhof borrowed only from standard varieties of languages and would not have taken nonstandard German pronunciation into consideration.

He goes on:

The answer is that Zamenhof borrowed the Schriftbild, rather than the Lautbild, of these German words.

But in the case of *fajfi*, *fajli* and *ŝajni* he evidently chose the “Lautbild.” Why? Gold cites the hypothesis of Richard E. Wood that the diphthong *ej* is partly of Yiddish origin.

István Szerdahelyi, in his article (1987) says quite generally: “La modelo de la D-transkribo estis la J kiel peranto inter D kaj E” (The model for transliteration from German was Yiddish as a mediator between German and Esperanto), and he lists the German words *Heim*, *feilen* and *pfeifen* as the origin of *hejmo*, *fajli* and *fajfi*, but he does not compare them to Yiddish (Szerdahelyi 1987: 123; see also the review by Gold 1987).

Old High German words with *ej* and *ī*

The five words with *ej/aj* in the phrase quoted above are from the *Fundamento* (Zamenhof 1991), the book from 1905 setting the standard for Esperanto; *hejti*, *fajfi* and *ŝajni* even appear in the first book of 1887. Let us look for the Old High German origins of these words and some others. Then a very clear pattern appears. This pattern becomes even more striking if we list also the corresponding words in some other Germanic languages, including Northeastern Yiddish. Zamenhof lived in Białystok until he was 14, and, as already remarked, the Yiddish of Białystok is a variety of Northeastern Yiddish.

First the words with *ej*:

Old High German	<i>heim</i>	<i>heiz</i>	<i>stein</i>	<i>eigan</i>	<i>ein</i>
German	<i>Heim</i>	<i>heiz</i>	<i>Stein</i>	<i>eigen</i>	<i>ein</i>
Yiddish (EYN)	<i>hejm</i>	<i>hejs</i>	<i>shtejn</i>	<i>ejgn</i>	<i>ejn</i>
Dutch	<i>heem</i>	<i>heet</i>	<i>steen</i>	<i>eigen</i>	<i>een</i>
Icelandic	<i>heimili</i>	<i>heitur</i>	<i>steinn</i>	<i>eigin</i>	<i>einn</i>
Swedish	<i>hem</i>	<i>het</i>	<i>sten</i>	<i>egen</i>	<i>en</i>
Old English	<i>hām</i>	<i>hāt</i>	<i>stān</i>	<i>āgen</i>	<i>ān</i>
English	<i>home</i>	<i>hot</i>	<i>stone</i>	<i>own</i>	<i>one</i>
Esperanto	<i>hejmo</i>	<i>hejti</i>	<i>ŝtono</i>	<i>propra</i>	<i>unu</i>

In the column with *hejti* I have written the words in the respective languages with the meaning ‘hot’, because I did not find translations of *hejti* ‘to heat’ in all languages; also the adjective seems to present the clearest analogies. In Yiddish the verb *to heat* is *hejtsn*.

We see that Old High German *ei* corresponds to Yiddish *ej*, to Dutch *ee* (except in the case of *eigen*), to Icelandic *ei*, to Swedish *e*, to Old English *ā* and English *o*, and finally in Esperanto to *ej* in the first two cases. In the three last cases, another choice was made; if Zamenhof had followed the

model of the first ones for the words *propa* and *stono*, they would certainly have been **ejgena* and **stejno*, respectively, or possibly **štejno*.

And now to the words in the same languages corresponding to some Esperanto words with *aj*, plus the river name *Rejno*:

Old High German German	<i>pfīfa</i> <i>pfeifen</i>	<i>vīlen</i> <i>feilen</i>	<i>skīman</i> <i>scheinen</i>	<i>Rīn, Hrīn</i> <i>Rhein</i>
Yiddish (EYN) Dutch Icelandic Swedish	<i>fajfn</i> <i>pīppen</i> <i>pīpa</i> <i>pīpa</i>	<i>fajln</i> <i>vījlen</i> [<i>thjöl</i>] <i>fila</i>	<i>shajnen</i> <i>schijnen</i> <i>skīna</i> <i>skina</i>	<i>rajn, rejn</i> <i>Rijn</i> <i>Rín</i> <i>Rhen</i>
Old English English	<i>pīpa</i> <i>pipe</i>	[<i>fēol</i>] <i>file</i>	<i>scīman</i> <i>shine</i>	<i>rīn</i> <i>Rhine</i>
Esperanto	<i>fajfi</i>	<i>fajli</i>	<i>ŝajni</i>	<i>Rejno</i>

Here the Old High German *pfīfa*, the Icelandic *pīpa* and the Old English *pīpa* all mean ‘pipe’. The Yiddish *shajnen* means ‘to shine’, just as the Swedish word, not ‘to seem, to appear’ as the German and Esperanto words in the same column.

The classical form of the modern Icelandic *thjöl* ‘file’ was *thél*, in Old Swedish *fel*, *fæl*. The modern Swedish word *fil* ‘file’ is borrowed from Low German *vīle*. Thus a word can arrive to a language along several roads.

The Old High German *ī* corresponds in Dutch to *ij*, in Icelandic in general to *í*, in Old English in general to *ī*, in English to *i*, and, in the first three cases, in Yiddish to *aj*, in Swedish to *i*, and in Esperanto to *aj*.

Concerning the name *Rejno* things differ a little, for according to the models of Old High German, Dutch, Icelandic, Old English, and English, it should have been **Rajno*. (Note, however, the English adjective *Rhenish*, from the Latin name *Rhenus*.) That Zamenhof chose *Rejno* rather than **Rajno* can be under the influence of the Russian way of transliterating German proper names and loanwords from German: Russian Рейнъ (now Рейн), similarly Эйнштейн for *Einstein*, and рейнвейн, мейстерзингер from the German *Rheinwein*, *Meistersinger*. In Yiddish dictionaries the river name is commonly rendered as *rajn*. David L. Gold, in a private letter to me, writes: “I have now determined that the Yiddish *rayn* is a recent borrowing of New High German *Rhein*. The traditional Yiddish name for the river is *reyn*.” He goes on: “However, I am not certain that

Zamenhof knew the traditional Yiddish word. Speakers of Eastern Yiddish did not have occasion to talk about that river.”

As already pointed out, the East Yiddish words in the two tables are romanized according to their Białystok pronunciation. In the Yiddish of Warsaw, pronunciation is different although the distinction is made also there: to *ej/aj* in Białystok corresponds the pair *aj/ā* in Warsaw. This fact is mentioned by Zamenhof in his Yiddish grammar (1982:10, 38), and, as we could see above, he considered the “Lithuanian” pronunciation, i.e., the subdialect EYN (Birnbaum 1979:97), to be purer and more correct. By the way, in his proposed alphabet for Yiddish he would write some of the words mentioned above as *hejcĕn*, *fajfĕn*, *fajlĕn*, *śajnĕn*, using the new letter ĕ, denoting a vowel (a kind of schwa) not to be confused with *e*.

By presenting this comparison I by no means want to claim that Zamenhof knew, or was influenced by, Dutch, Icelandic, or Swedish. But I want to show that the distinction of *ei* and *ī* in Old High German, which was lost in German, is still preserved in several modern Germanic languages, and that this distinction somehow survived in Esperanto. Along which lines and for which reasons?

We have seen that the distinction in Old High German between *ei* and *ī* is conserved, both in writing and pronunciation, in several Germanic languages: in East Yiddish (*ej* as opposed to *aj* in the northern group and *aj* as opposed to *ā* in the southern group³), in Dutch (*ee* as opposed to *ij*), in Icelandic (*ei* as opposed to *í*), in Swedish (*e* as opposed to *i*), in Old English (*ā* as opposed to *ī*) and English (*o* as opposed to *i*). Also in Esperanto this distinction is made: *ej* as opposed to *aj* in the examples considered. Of the languages mentioned here, German is the only one where they are merged into a single *ei*. Mieses (1924:32) expresses this fact more drastically, writing that the Modern High German “Vokalismus ein Nivellierungsprodukt ist, das über verschiedene historische Vokalformen der mhd. Sprache uniformierend fuhr, während der Jude an einem älteren Lautstadium festhält.”

Probably the distinction was and is made in several German dialects. I do not dare to exclude that Zamenhof was influenced by some German dialect. I do not know how he pronounced German, which he spoke fluently, nor how the Germans in Białystok or Warsaw pronounced the language.

³I am not sure that the word for home was pronounced [hajm] in all of EYS; perhaps it was only in EYSW; see the map in Birnbaum (1979:95). However, in Warsaw this was so; Warsaw belongs to EYSW. David L. Gold, in a personal letter (2008-01-03) to the author, gives the pronunciation as [hejm] in Northeastern and Southeastern Yiddish, as [hajm] in Central Yiddish, and as [ha:m] in Western Yiddish.

But David L. Gold (1980:316) and Ebbe Vilborg (in a personal letter to the author) assure us that we do not have to consider German dialects, only the standard High German language of Zamenhof's time.

Ebbe Vilborg, in a personal letter to the author, emphasizes that the choice of *aj* in *fajfi*, *fajli* and *ŝajni* broadens the base of these words, i.e., that by this choice Zamenhof succeeded in giving to the words some element of more languages (just as *ŝtono* is a compromise between *Stein* and *stone*). This is possible just because the distinction survived in English: the three words with *aj* are similar in pronunciation to English words. We may remark that one might just as well turn the argument around: because of this, Zamenhof obtained a suitable pretext for his spontaneous preference for the Yiddish forms.

My conclusions are the following.

1. To understand the choice between *ej* and *aj* in the words mentioned, it is totally insufficient to consider German as a source. It is not worthwhile to try to connect them in any way with German.⁴
2. That Yiddish in its Białystok pronunciation is the source of the considered Esperanto words is the simplest and most probable explanation.
3. However, since similar distinctions are made quite systematically in several Germanic languages, it is not possible with absolute certainty to prove what was really the reason behind the choices made by Zamenhof.⁵

The choice of a word in a planned language always contains some element of randomness. However, the remarkable observation made here is not randomness but the systematic agreement with the Białystok pronunciation of Yiddish.

10. Hillelism and Homaranismo

His whole life Zamenhof was driven by the idea of peace to mankind. He formulated religious principles that, he thought, could be accepted by every human being and saw his language as a means towards realizing a project

⁴Gold (1980:316) wanted to do this, but later (in a letter to me) agreed with my conclusions.

⁵See the explanation offered by Vilborg above.

of love, peace and understanding. He called these principles *Hilelismo* ‘Hillelism’, named for the Jewish religious leader Hillel the Elder, and later *Homaranismo* ‘Humanism’, from *homaro* ‘humanity’, *homarano* ‘a member of humanity’.

To comprehend his actions it is important to be acquainted also with this side of his personality. With regrets I have to refrain from going into detail concerning his religious ideas.

However, the religious side of his endeavors was not appreciated, notably during the first and second international congresses, in Boulogne-sur-Mer 1905 and in Geneva 1906. The leading French Esperantists looked upon Esperanto as a practical invention, more like a telegraph by means of which one could send any message. This was indeed far from Zamenhof’s thinking.

11. Who was Zamenhof, really?

Zamenhof considered himself as a son of Poland (Maimon 1978:203). His native country or province he called Lithuania, notably in his speech in the City of London Guildhall in 1907 (Zamenhof 1929:383, 1997:48). He was a member of the Jewish people. He was a citizen of Russia. So who was he, really? He had several identities, and it is not easy to understand these identities and how they interacted over time in the different cultural settings he lived in.

However, he united all these identities in an overriding one: *Mi estas homo* ‘I am a human being’. He was born into a multicultural environment and he was a cosmopolitan from a very early age.

In his speech in Bologne-sur-Mer in 1905 he said:

But precisely as I am at this moment not a member of any nation, but a simple human being, I also feel that at this moment I do not belong to any religion, but I am only a human being. (Zamenhof 1997:15; translated by the author)

12. In conclusion

Esperanto is an interesting cultural phenomenon and deserves to be studied from the viewpoints of several disciplines, social sciences as well as linguistics. Its speakers form a many-faceted group, dispersed over large parts of the planet. It is interesting to belong to this community, since few other groups of people have so culturally diverse interests, so many international

contacts, and such great tolerance for others. In today's parlance, it is a social network. It can in some respects be compared with the speakers of Yiddish or Romani. I would think that it is at least as interesting to be an Esperantist as to belong to the Yiddish-speakers or the Romani-speakers. But there is a difference. If you would like to become a Yiddish-speaking Jew or a Romani-speaking Gypsy not being one from birth, then you cannot. But if you want to become an Esperanto-speaking Esperantist, then you can.

Acknowledgment

I am indebted to David L. Gold for many important comments (in 1992 as well as in 2008) on Yiddish, especially on its pronunciation; to Ebbe Vilborg for careful remarks on the etymology of Esperanto words; and to Ragnar Sigurdsson for help with Icelandic words.

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About the author

I am a professional mathematician, and I have known Kraków mathematicians a long time: my first visit to Kraków dates back to 1974, when Professor Józef Siciak organized a conference on analytic functions here. I have since then come back to Kraków and other cities in Poland many times. I have been to Warsaw, Łódź, Kielce, Błażejewko, in the mountains

close to Kozubnik, and in Bielsko-Biała for mathematical reasons; to Warsaw, Gdańsk, Zakopane, Częstochowa, and Poznań for other reasons. I feel deeply honored by being elected as a foreign member of this academy.

I am not a professional linguist, but I have been interested in languages since I was a child. The teacher in Norra real in Stockholm that made the strongest impression on me was Karl Axnäs (1899–1984), who held a Ph.D. in Slavic languages and was my teacher of German. I also listened to his radio course in Russian. His thesis had the title *Slavisch-baltisches in altnordischen Beinamen*. Uppsala: Appelbergs, 1937. XV + 114 pp. This early interest in languages resulted in a membership in the Esperanto Academy in 1989.

On this occasion, Professor Siciak has suggested that I speak about Esperanto rather than mathematics, probably because mathematics would be of less general interest. (I have no difficulty in following his suggestion.)