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THE DIGITAL WAY TO SPREAD CONLANGS

FEDERICO GOBBO

Università degli Studi dell'Insubria

ABSTRACT

Internet has done a new impulse to spread new and old conlangs, from literary ones (such as Klingonian or Tolkien's elvish tongues) to auxiliary ones (such as Volapük, Esperanto, Ido and Interlingua). This paper will show how Internet forms a perfect environment for the establishment of virtual communities of conlang users. This environment gives to some conlangs a language vitality either lost yet (Volapük) or never have before (Klingonian) or eventually it grows vitality already established in the 'meatspace' (Esperanto, Ido, Interlingua). So, the spreading of conlangs in Internet opens interesting new fields in sociolinguistics, widely unexplored.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is a conlang? A conlang, or better an invented language (Bausani, 1970), is a complete language system written by one people, the langmaker, who wants his language being used by others for specific purposes. In this paper we consider conlangs only *complete* systems, i.e. conlangs which can be potentially (or actually are) spoken by people, traditionally called *a posteriori* languages¹ (Couturat-Leau). Conlangs can be analysed in two groups: languages for literary purposes and languages for auxiliary purposes.

Whatever the underlying reasons of launching a conlang are auxiliary or not, the langmaker has to front a paradox: the only speaker of his conlang is himself. A question arise: can Internet be an environment to start a sort of vitality of the newborn language? Arguably, conlangs can be taught via email or throughout a web site, with forums and similar stuffs. On the other side, if the conlang has already some language vitality, Internet can be a new tool to spread the word.

2. HOW MANY CONLANGS?

The Italian dictionary of invented languages (Albani-Buonarroti, 1994) describes almost 3000 conlangs and *a priori* secondary modeling systems (types of semiospheres, see note 1), all launched before Internet became a mass phenomenon, with the invention of the web (Berners-Lee, 2000). From the coming age of the Web Era in 1993, it didn't pass a lot of time before someone started talking about conlangs. The oldest mailing list about the subject, the *Constructed Languages List* based in Brown University, has its first post dated September 1998. The site www.langmaker.com is the unofficial but quite complete repository of conlangs present in the web: in the 11th of July 2004 lists 1086 conlangs, a half of them launched in the web. So, the first important remark is: before the web, a langmaker had to launch a conlang publishing a book with base grammar, dictionary and sample texts; nowadays, he publish a web site. Moreover, as happened in other fields of knowledge, the web doesn't keep memory of conlangs published before the Web Era: the repository has lost 2000 conlangs referred in the Italian dictionary.

3. LITERARY CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGES AND INTERNET: TWO CASE-STUDIES

Mostly, new conlangs don't go further the state of launching, even throughout the web. If we are dealing with a literary conlang, its luck depends strictly by the literary background. The most interesting phenomenon is the Klingonian launched in 1985 by the linguist Marc Okrand with the financial support of Paramount Pictures, the publisher of *Star Trek* series. In the aims of its langmaker, the Klingonian was created as a tool for scriptwriters and actors of *Star Trek* series, not more. Nevertheless, someone started actually using the language through the Internet and even speaking in informal meetings. Although Paramount owns the copyright of Klingonian, people started to write and even speak the language without a relation with *Star Trek*: after 20 years of use “only a minority of the Klingonists consider themselves as trekkers and by the modernization of Klingon that gives the language more vocabulary not related to *Star Trek* concepts” (Wahlgren, 2004: 16) nowadays the community has developed a set of neologisms out of the control by Paramount. This phenomenon seems to be paradigmatic: the values of a conlang achieving a supporter community are found in the language itself, more than in the background culture from it spread off. Nevertheless, to establish a community a newborn literary conlang has to be set on a cultural background.

An other case-study is the set of languages constructed by the English philologist J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Hobbit*, the *Silmarillion* and mostly in *The Lord of the Rings*. In particular, the novels develop the elvish tongues, Quenya and Sindarin. The E.L.F. (Elvish Linguistic Fellowship) is devoted to study scholarly these languages. It is interesting that the first FAQ in the site is answering the question: “Is it possible to speak Quenya and Sindarin?”. Of course, the answer is no. Sir Tolkien was well aware about the auxiliary languages (he even had a lecture in an Esperanto Congress) and he didn't want to create a language suitable to be spoken as he wrote in his letters. So, Tolkien's languages can't fall in a sociolinguistic phenomenon as Klingon. Reading some publication of E.L.F., they seem well written, in the typical style of linguistic publications about ancient or dead languages, where sources are only written. Next year it is planned the first international congress, complete with Call of Papers. In this case Internet is not more than a presentation tool to the world. In fact, the main publications are on paper, not on line.

4. AUXILIARY LANGUAGES IN THE WEB: PROJECTS REBORN

The situation is quite different dealing about auxiliary conlangs (from now, auxlangs). As it was well described by Eco (1993) and others (Gobbo, 1998), the Golden Age of auxlangs started from 1879 (launching of Volapük) and finishes in 1951 (launching of Interlingua): there is no more space in the market of auxlangs nowadays, if the langmaker wants seriously to have a community of users, a sort of vitality. Most conlangs born in Internet in fact are reforms of Esperanto², and they didn't care much attention by anyone save the langmaker. Interestingly, two sites written in English against Esperanto gained far more attention by Esperanto speakers compared with reform projects³. The community is highly sensitive to direct attacks, not to reform proposals. What is the sociolinguistic bias of such a fact? As pointed out by Forster (1982), the Esperanto history shows that reform proposals didn't touch the stableness of its speech community much, after the so-called *ido-skismo*. From the first international congress in 1905 in France, Esperanto has reached a stable speech community who survived two World Wars and beyond. Now it has gained a new base from the Internet medium. But before dealing with the somehow special case of Esperanto, due to its wideness, we will explore conlangs whose sociolinguistic base were given primarily by the new medium of Internet.

4.1. Volapük: the very phoenix of auxlangs

Volapük was the first auxlang developing a community of speakers, from the launching in 1879 by Schleyer (Eco, 1993). It had a lot of *a priori* elements in its structure, curiously similar to Loglan/Lojlan⁴. The autocratic personality of the langmaker, who didn't accept changes proposed by the authority of the Academy of Volapük, started declining the language, and the final straw was done by the rising of Esperanto. An attempt to give again life to the language was done in 1931 by Arie de Jong, but her reform proposal wasn't lucky. According to Large (1985), the survival of the last volapükist periodical dates 1960. After this date, only some esperantist learned Volapük for pleasure or artistic effects⁵.

The Volapük movement appears to have been given a new lease on life by the Internet. At least, internet has given less successful auxlangs the opportunity to demonstrate the tenacity of their supporting movements: Wikipedia, a web place which reflects the engagement of a linguistic community supporting a language⁶, has a version of its own in volapük, counting 44 entries⁷. Today there is a Yahoo group for volapükists, and a meetup place, listing eight speakers in the world⁸. Nowadays Volapük is used primarily as a language *divertissement*.

4.2. Esperanto offsprings and Interlingua

Ido is the only direct offspring of Esperanto which has a stable, although small, language vitality. It was launched in 1908, as the result of the seven-year work by the *Délégation pour l'adoption d'une Langue Auxiliaire Internationale*⁹. After analysing Esperanto and other auxlangs listed by Couturat-Leau (1979), Louis de Beaufront (former esperantist) and Couturat (interlinguist scholar) made a reform of Esperanto they called Ido (meaning 'offspring'). Unfortunately as idists were never satisfied by the language structure, the movement was splitted down by other auxlang projects growing up when professional linguists entered the langmaking arena, as Occidental (by De Wahl, 1922) and Novial (by Jespersen, 1928): according to Carlevaro (1989), in 1929 there were only 25 speakers of Ido. After the difficulties occurred during the Second World War, the first congress occurred in 1960 in Swizerland: the supporters were 50. The second one was in 1980, only 35 people taking part. Quite humourously, mostly Ido speakers were also Esperanto speakers who consider the language worth studying. The role played by the new digital age is undoubtly. The frequency of congresses occurred from the 1990s is one per year, according to Wikipedia. The main medium for organizing congresses arguably is Internet itself, and the ido movement has some places in the web (site, forum, and the like) well active.

Ido was the first step toward a naturalization (or better said: romanization) of the structure of the international language projects. An other conlang which gained interest at this launch is Novial, but, as often happened to conlangs, it died with its langmaker Jespersen in 1943. Nevertheless, in 1998 some people at Brown University made a relaunch of Novial, named Novial98, in which no part of the structure was touched, only the lexicon was actualized and it seem still active. I think that Novial supporters are very few, no more than ten. This case confirms the role played by Internet: Novial98 was created in the Internet and there it achieved a new supporting base.

The process of romanization continued beyond Novial, throughout Occidental, then reformed as Interlingue. Finally, thanks to the financial support of Mrs Morris and Rockefeller Foundation, the IALA (*International Auxiliary Language Association*) launched, in 1951, Interlingua, which is the only auxlang with a speech community with a purely no-esperantic base. After the death of Mrs Morris IALA was closed and no more financial support was given to Interlingua, so the community never attended more than 1000 speakers worldwide. Still, the *Union Mundial pro Interlingua* organizes a conference every two year, attended by 30-50 people. Reading the frequency of the congresses and the presence of the official site we can argue Internet had greatly helped the supporters organize the movement.

5. A NEW GENERATION OF ESPERANTISTS THROUGH THE NET

Before dealing with Esperanto, it is important to explain my personal engagement to the Esperanto movement. I can read without studying Interlingua because my mother language is Italian, I can read studying Novial, Occidental and Ido, but Esperanto is the only auxlang I speak fluently and I took the speech community part. An average Esperanto congress has 300-400 people. The most pessimistic estimate of the wideness of Esperanto community is done by Large (1985): 50.000 speakers. There are also about 1000 of bilingual families, i.e. families where Esperanto is one of the two or more languages spoken to children. According to Bergen (2001), there are emerging nativization processes in L1 Esperanto speakers, widely unstudied yet.

Without doubt, Esperanto has a stable language vitality far great compared to conlangs seen before. For example, the Esperanto version of Wikipedia has 13.000 entries: compare with the Italian version (17.000) and the Spanish one (25.000)¹⁰. I started learning Esperanto through an e-mail course in English, and, after going to some congresses to stabilize my language proficiency, I adapted the course and entered the committee of Italian Esperanto Youth. A lot of people started using this language throughout national language web courses and it is still so nowadays.

There are a lot of Esperanto congresses worldwide, almost one per day somewhere. Basing on my personal experience, Internet plays two roles in the Esperanto movement: it is a socializing medium, i.e. a medium to get new people involved, and a facilitator, i.e. a medium to keep contacts, and to organize congresses, as it happens for other auxlangs.

6. CONCLUSION: INTERNET, A VIRTUAL PLACE FOR VIRTUAL LANGUAGES

We have seen that the main phenomena in literary conlangs are conlangs well supported by a culture, in the sense used by anthropologists: in this sense, Star Trek and Tolkien's books can be well considered cultures by their own. The role played by Internet, especially in the case of Klingon, is as a socializing medium, i.e. to establish a speakers community. Interestingly, the culture background goes less important as the role played by Internet grows. We have also pointed out that Internet is a condition not sufficient to make a conlang interesting beyond its langmaker: the role played by culture is central. In other words, a conlang must have roots outside and before the Web Era to be interesting to Internet users.

In the case of auxlangs, the role of Internet is as important as well: if the auxlang has (or had, in the case of Volapük) a language vitality, Internet plays a role of supporting the reasons of the auxlang fans. In the special case of Esperanto, Internet make the movement more visibly to the world, for example by Wikipedia. So, if we consider Internet as a virtual place, Internet itself becomes the natural place for virtual languages as all conlangs are.

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- 1 The so-called *a priori* languages are not languages, just semiospheres at a level of secondary modeling systems (Lotman, 1990).
- 2 See for example <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/conlang/>.
- 3 See <http://www.xibalba.demon.co.uk/jbr/ranto/> by Justin B. Rye, <http://www.steve.gb.com/rants/esperanto.html> by a guy named Steve and <http://www.cix.co.uk/~morven/lang/esp.html> by Geoff Allan Eddy. Controlled the 26th of April 2005.
- 4 Lojlan (the free version of Loglan, launched by Dr. James Cooke Brown, a sociologist and SF-writer), has gained some attention from people interested in logic and formal languages, due to its structure. See <http://www.lojban.org/>
- 5 See the use of Volapük in the theatrical piece *La familio de Anto Speri* by Giorgio Silfer in the esperantic cultural review *Literatura Foiro*.
- 6 Wikipedia (home: <http://en.wikipedia.org>) is one of the advanced software engines of collaborative work. Its contents are under a strictly copyright-free licence, and the contributions are made by volunteers.
- 7 Controlled the 13th of July 2004.
- 8 In the Yahoo group <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/volapuk/> language used are, in this order: English, Esperanto, Volapük. See also <http://volapuk.meetup.com>. Controlled the 26th of April 2005.
- 9 According to Leau (1933), the decision *pro ido* was taken by four people, not the whole committee.
- 10 Controlled the 16th of July 2004.