

**Questions**  
and  
**Answers**  
about  
**Esperanto**

**A guide for activists**

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Introduction-----	1
What is Esperanto? -----	2
Is it Spanish?-----	2
Is it really easier?-----	2
Do you really expect people to give up their own languages?-----	3
What's in it for me?-----	3
What's wrong with English?-----	4
But English is already the international language...? (or, But I went to XXXX and everyone speaks English) -----	5
How come I never heard of it?-----	5
What is it based on? -----	6
Hasn't that died out? (or, Wasn't that big back in the Thirties?)-----	6
Can you use it like an ordinary language? -----	6
Can you swear in it?-----	6
How do people outside of Europe like it?-----	7
What's the purpose of all this?-----	7
How was it invented? Who invented it?-----	7
Where is it used?-----	7
How many people use it?-----	8
How long has it been around?-----	8
How come it hasn't succeeded yet?-----	8
Does it really have a chance? -----	9
But the Bible says...? -----	9
What does it sound like?-----	10
Can you speak it? / say something in it? -----	10
What does it look like?-----	10
But English is so expressive...? -----	11
There's no Esperanto literature, is there? -----	11
But there's no Esperanto culture, right?-----	11
Where is it taught? / Where can I learn it?-----	11
I have enough trouble with English!-----	12
But I can't go anywhere and just use it, can I?-----	12
I don't like the feminine suffix...-----	12
I don't like the superscripts...-----	13
I don't like the accusative...-----	13
Why not use prepositions instead of endings, etc.-----	13
Language teachers -----	14
But if you really want to learn about a particular culture...-----	14
Is it bigger than a breadbox?-----	14
Won't it eventually break up into dialects?-----	14
Has the language changed at all since it began?-----	15
How do new words get added?-----	15
How many words are there in Esperanto?-----	15
Where can I get in touch with Esperantists or clubs?-----	15
How did you get involved in Esperanto? -----	16
Aren't we better off if we can't talk to other people?-----	16
Has anyone famous ever supported Esperanto?-----	16
Less common questions-----	17
Miscellaneous suggestions-----	18
Afterword-----	18
Addresses-----	18



## Questions and (reasonable) answers: A guide for activists

Frequently we talk to people who have never heard of Esperanto before, or who don't really know anything about it. Therefore, they have lots of questions. Below are most of the questions you should encounter, with reasonable responses for each. I don't promise that they'll always work, and you should feel free to try others, but these seem to work well for me.

First, though, a word of caution. You are probably the first Esperantist that these people have ever met. The impression that you give may determine their response to Esperanto. So, try to appear reasonable, friendly, and informed. Make sure that you do not seem fanatic or unreasonable! Even if they do not think Esperanto is a good idea (actually, most people respond quite well) they will be impressed by your calmness and knowledge.

Second, a word of encouragement. If you are going to be educating the public, relax! It's easier than you think. Most people respond to the idea of a second, international language very well. Besides, you already know more about it than they do. Between those points and this guide, you should have little trouble (and a good deal of fun) telling people about Esperanto.

The questions and answers are more or less in order of frequency. I have moved some of the more important points to the front, however. These are: that Esperanto is intended as a *second* language and does not replace anything; that Esperanto is much easier to learn; that Esperanto aids international understanding and cooperation; that they can get a lot out of Esperanto; and why English is not the answer to the world language problem. Nonetheless I suggest that you carefully read the entire pamphlet, since many ideas and discussion points didn't fit very well and may be a little buried.

### Changes in 2003 version:

I added "Miscellaneous suggestions." Minor updates (El Popola Ĉinio now is Web-only). Text enlarged to 11 point for legibility.

### Changes in 1992 version:

This version has a lot of small changes. I've updated addresses as necessary (and added ELNA's 800 number), and included some computer network addresses.

I've combined the sections "Does it really have a chance?" and "Do you really think it will ever catch on?" because they are really the same question; and added a note there about using that question to encourage people to learn Esperanto. I added a note about the movement in the section "Why hasn't Esperanto succeeded yet?" There's a new section, "Has anyone famous ever supported Esperanto?" And I made other small changes here and there.

Previous versions: 1987 (original), 1990, 1992.

### Acknowledgments:

An earlier pamphlet, *Some Prejudiced Questions... Some Honest Answers about Esperanto* had nine questions and answers (more oriented towards the general public than this is; I don't know who the author is). Various people have contributed suggestions or improvements. Cathy Schulze, Sherry Wells, and Don Harlow helped with this revision. I apologize to others who have also helped but whose names I have forgotten.

## WHAT IS ESPERANTO?

The very first question.

Don't be surprised by it. Roughly half the people I've talked with, including well-educated ones, have never heard of Esperanto before, and most of the rest could only connect it with the phrase "international language" or "universal language."

Two good answers are, "The International Language" or "The International Language *that works*." We've found that, at exhibitions or displays, an effective discussion can start like this:

"Hello! Have you ever heard of Esperanto?"

"Yes" — you can say, "Terrific, where/how/when did you hear about it?" and begin a discussion.

Or, "No" — a very common answer. You can reply with a standard speech. "It's the international language, used by millions of people in over a hundred countries, and it was specifically designed to be easy to learn and to be politically neutral." Then you can tell them about the language problem, or more details about Esperanto, its uses, the thousands of books in Esperanto, how it's actually four to ten times easier to learn, etc. This opening also avoids embarrassing them, because it implies that they are not expected to know anything about Esperanto.

Be willing to put together a new intro for your specific audience. For example, when we did a table at a homeschooler's conference, the intro above bombed. We changed it to "Hi! Are you teaching someone at home?" (the answer was almost always "Yes"), then explained how its grammar is streamlined and very regular, so parents could learn it fast enough to stay a lesson ahead of the kids, and so kids could learn that languages are fun instead of just boring lists of exceptions to memorize.

Another response that has been suggested is "The Intercultural Language." This avoids the common response about English, but it also avoids the real point of Esperanto: bringing nations together, not just cultures within nations. Also, people don't react as well to it.

You may want to stay away from the words "artificial" or "invented." These may imply that Esperanto is not a people language, that it is in some way awkward for people or limited. Esperanto is organic!

## IS IT SPANISH?

This question probably happens because "Esperanto" looks like "Español," which is a word that people already know. No, it's not Spanish. However, much of the vocabulary is related to Spanish, as well as French, German, Italian, etc., and it does sound rather like Spanish or Italian.

## IS IT REALLY EASIER?

Yes it is! And this is a very important point for Esperanto: *four to ten times easier!* Why? Because the grammar is very simple, and completely regular. No exceptions to the rules. The spelling and pronunciation are completely regular. (That cuts down on brain strain — "What you hear is what you get"!) A lot of the vocabulary is related to English, French, German, and other Romance and Slavic languages, so that's easier too. Plus the affixes vastly expand the vocabulary so you don't have to memorize zillions of new words... You can go on for quite a while about this.

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Since I'm not positive that Esperanto is *absolutely* regular, I usually say "extremely regular." It's also not "easy" to learn — no language is, so I say "easier" than other languages. People still have to study and learn vocabulary. And last, I don't usually push the 16 Rules, since people can't memorize the rules and know Esperanto — but you can mention that it has only sixteen *basic* rules. Esperanto is sufficiently wonderful without exaggerating.

## DO YOU REALLY EXPECT PEOPLE TO GIVE UP THEIR OWN LANGUAGES?

Absolutely not! This is another important point that should be made at the beginning: Esperanto is the *second* language for everyone. It's designed for *international* use — not necessarily for *intranational* use. Esperanto isn't out to replace anything. It's there to build bridges between isolated language groups.

## WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

This is a question that you must answer in your exhibit or speech. Your answer to this will directly determine your results. If you can give people a good enough reason to learn it, they will. Otherwise they won't. People do things because they get something out of it — period. Fortunately, what they get out of it isn't necessarily financial or greedy. People also do things if they can learn something, or spend time enjoyably, or sometimes even just to help the world...

Here are some of the things that Esperanto is good for:

- Esperanto is a way to promote peace, and thus to make our world a little safer and a little better. It's a way that any citizen can get to know other countries better, and to tell others about our country and our ideas. It's a way that lets us bypass the governments (and sometimes governments can't work for peace for political reasons, or just out of their own internal momentum).
- Esperanto is an ideal introduction to other languages. It helps you learn how languages are put together, and how to learn a language, without getting bogged down by lists of exceptions. It will also introduce you to a great deal of vocabulary in European languages.
- Esperanto is an ideal second language. A lot of adults want to learn a second language, but don't have the time or energy to learn a national language.
- International understanding. You can't be friends with people if you can't talk to them! I've used that exact sentence and people agree. Esperanto helps break down the language barriers between countries. (We even have one poster where we call Esperanto a "peace weapon" because of this.)
- Joining the world. Esperanto is a way to treat everyone on our planet on the basis of complete equality, meeting them half way. No more trying to communicate "uphill" for one side! (See "What's wrong with English?" below.)
- Learning about other countries. Magazines are an inexpensive way to travel! Show them *El Popola Ĉinio*, *La Espero* (from Korea), etc. (*El Popola Ĉinio* no longer appears on paper. Go to their website, [www.espero.com.cn](http://www.espero.com.cn).)
- Travel. Explain how to travel on Esperanto tours, how to visit Esperantists in other countries, how to use the Jarlibro to find out who's where. (And every Esperantist you meet will be an instant friend!)

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- Meeting people from other countries. Especially at the conventions, or when Esperantists from other lands visit here. (It's also a good way to meet interesting people from your own country!)
- Meeting people from our own country. People from all walks of life get involved, and they often have a wide range of interests and many interesting stories to tell.
- Pen pals (when you're talking to kids) or Correspondence (when you're talking to adults) — correspond with people in a dozen countries without learning a dozen languages.
- Business. This one's a little shaky right now... but we're working on making Esperanto common enough that even business people will routinely use it someday. Some businesses have used Esperanto for advertising, such as the airlines KLM and Swissair. Many resorts advertise in Esperanto magazines. Many Esperantists have found work or customers in other countries.
- Hobbies. Stamp-collecting (philately) especially, or postcards, or discussing all sorts of things with people in other countries. Check the Jarlibro for more details.
- Here's one that must have grabbed you: changing other people's lives by being active and by showing them how useful and fun Esperanto can be! A lot of people would like to do something useful with their lives... I haven't used this approach much, but it's worth trying.

Know what you want your talk or exhibit to accomplish: inform people? get them to join your group? sign up for classes? Then encourage them to *do* that. You'll probably also want another event, such as a monthly meeting or evening class, soon after a major exhibit, so people can get involved immediately instead of waiting and possibly losing interest.

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH ENGLISH?

Several things. (And you should point out that *all* national languages, not just English, suffer from these problems.)

First, English is a very difficult language to learn unless you've been immersed in it since birth. English spelling is said to be more difficult than any other language except Gaelic. English grammar, although it may be fairly simple, is riddled with exceptions. Verbs are very often irregular. Many people just aren't going to devote several years of effort to learn it!

Another problem is that English carries political baggage. Many nations were once colonies of European countries, and find that is reason enough to avoid English, French, German, etc. Others are unhappy with the superpowers and therefore want nothing to do with them. Strange, illogical, but that's the way people feel. The ELNA Bulletin once quoted a Zambian newspaper as saying that Zambians would rather use their perfectly good national languages than English. *Multiple* languages!

Yet another reason is that by using a major national language, you automatically get the culture of that language: books, magazines, TV and radio, commentary, etc. Many countries do not want to be overwhelmed by someone else's culture... sometimes very much so. (Recent example: Iran. After their revolution in the 1970s, English was a very unpopular language.)

One last point that Americans often do not realize: people very often feel *humiliated* when they have to use someone else's language, especially when the other person speaks the language fluently but they must stumble through it like a child. It's embarrassing, it interferes with getting ideas or opinions across, and it's distracting to continually struggle with one's words. With Esperanto, everyone can meet as equals, instead of one side having to communicate "uphill."

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## **BUT ENGLISH IS ALREADY THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE...? (or, BUT I WENT TO XXXX AND EVERYONE SPEAKS ENGLISH)**

A really simple, effective, and smug answer is: “Yes, for people who already speak it.”

Whether or not you use that, you should go on to explain that only a few diplomats and other people who have the money, education, and time needed to learn English have done that; and that a few business people, faced with economic necessity, have learned enough words to (usually) get their meaning across. The highest figure I have ever seen for English speakers is fifteen percent — worldwide — which includes the native speakers in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand! And of those who learned it as a second language, what percent are actually fluent? Too often, at supposedly “international” conferences, those whose native language is not English can only read their papers to the audience — they cannot participate in discussions or even answer questions effectively.

English has gained its “worldwide” stature because of the current economic and political power of English-speaking countries. In the past, every superpower has briefly seen its native tongue used internationally: France, Spain, Portugal, the Roman empire. In fact, one of the main reasons that Esperanto was never adopted by the League of Nations was that France blocked efforts to adopt it. At the time, French was “the international language,” and France expected it to stay that way forever. They were proven wrong within twenty years. What success English has had is *not* due to any linguistic superiority, but rather to political and economic fortune.

For those who say that everyone speaks English, ask if it’s *really* everyone, or just the privileged groups who have the time and money to invest in learning a foreign language. Or ask what percentage of the people in the world can actually speak English. Ask if the common people “everywhere” know English, or if they’ve ever been in a tiny town and looked for English speakers. Sure, in a few places almost everyone really does speak English... but this is certainly not a worldwide phenomenon.

Another useful approach is to say that Esperanto and English aren’t competing. English has its uses, and if you want to meet people half-way, without putting them through the effort and frustration of using someone else’s language, Esperanto is useful too. “With English you make money, with Esperanto you make friends” (a good line from Dorothy Holland-Kaupp).

Some English speakers are adamant that other people want to learn English. (And to some degree they’re right.) Don’t try to convince them otherwise, since you probably can’t. Instead, point out that Esperanto lets people speak as equals. Or this seems to work: I say that, if everyone else wants to learn *my* language, that’s fine by me! — but I’m perfectly willing to meet them half way.

## **HOW COME I NEVER HEARD OF IT?**

The United States has never had a language problem comparable to Europe, where you cannot travel 500 miles in any direction without needing a couple of new languages. So people here aren’t forced to be aware of the need for an international language. Europeans are much more aware of Esperanto.

Also, people from the U.S. tend to assume that English is used everywhere. There’s very little interest in any foreign languages here. (Also see “How come it hasn’t succeeded yet?” for notes on the lack of publicity in the U.S.)

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## WHAT IS IT BASED ON?

It's generally based on the best structures from several languages. Esperanto is most related to the European or Romance languages, but it has strong influences from German and other languages. Zamenhof picked structures that seemed effective, useful, and simple. For example, when he studied English, he realized that nouns don't have a gender — English speakers don't worry about whether a table (or a democracy) is masculine or feminine. Zamenhof thought that was a distinct improvement, so Esperanto doesn't assign gender to nouns. Another example: Zamenhof noticed that certain words are frequently used as suffixes, and realized that this would enlarge the vocabulary significantly without a great deal of learning, so a system of regular suffixes was built in.

For those who feel that Esperanto is too Indo-European, you may want to point out that its agglutinative grammar is more like Korean or Turkish. It also has many non-European roots.

## HASN'T THAT DIED OUT? (or, WASN'T THAT BIG BACK IN THE THIRTIES?)

No. Esperanto is doing well in many countries, especially in Europe, and it's gaining ground in many Third World countries. Lately, it has received much attention in Iran, Japan, and the People's Republic of China.

However, for your own information... Esperanto has never been big in the United States. This is partly due to the lack of interest in languages, partly due to McCarthy-era politics, when the president of EANA (predecessor to ELNA) accused the UEA of being Communist-oriented. EANA then simultaneously left and was thrown out of the UEA. (Incidents like these, where Esperanto has been impeded by being involved in local or national politics, have shown that a completely neutral stance is safer. And this incident is probably too parochial to be interesting to most people.)

Better still, see "How come it hasn't succeeded yet?"

## CAN YOU USE IT LIKE AN ORDINARY LANGUAGE?

This is another important point. The answer is a clear *yes!* Sometimes we accidentally give people the impression, or they assume, that a "regular" or "planned" language will be extremely logical, or that you won't be able to use it like other languages. Tell them that only the grammar is logical. Point out the books, poetry, magazines in Esperanto. Mention the discussions and correspondence between ordinary people. With the right people, you can point out things like "Kruko kaj Baniko el Bervalo," a collection of dirty jokes. Esperanto is a real, complete human language. (See the section "Less Common Questions" for a related topic.)

## CAN YOU SWEAR IN IT?

Similar to the above question. People ask this if they're thinking that it's some kind of extremely logical or encoded language. Reassure them that they can use Esperanto for anything they could use a national language for. (Have some safe swear words available, like "Diable!" — the devil!)

## HOW DO PEOPLE OUTSIDE OF EUROPE LIKE IT?

A good question that frequently comes up. Admittedly, people who speak a European or Slavic language will have something of a head start. But Esperanto is still several times easier to learn than any European language, and it's more neutral. The best proof of Esperanto's neutrality may be Iran: after their revolution, English was not very popular. Students in English classes told their instructors to learn Esperanto, then come back and teach them that. Also, as noted elsewhere, Esperanto is having some success in China and Japan, and the Korean movement is strong enough that it has even bought its own building.

## WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF ALL THIS?

The purpose of Esperanto is to make the world a better and safer place, by helping people communicate with each other. We all share a small, endangered planet, and we should at least be able to find out what's on each other's minds. Better yet, we should be able to be friends with them... but the first necessity is communication. How can we resolve global issues if we can't even talk with people in other countries, or read their books and newspapers, listen to their radio and TV? Beyond the ideal of improving the chances for peace, there are the pragmatic problems of world trade, tourism, etc. which are created by the language barriers.

Esperanto doesn't claim to be a cure-all — maybe things won't improve along with improved communication, improved trade, etc. — but it is a vital first step.

## HOW WAS IT INVENTED? WHO INVENTED IT?

I won't go into the entire history of Esperanto. Look up, for example, Marjorie Boulton's book on Zamenhof. It is probably useful to stress the amount of testing that Zamenhof did: he tried out a great many ideas on his friends and relatives, dropped those that weren't simple or clear enough, picked up ideas from a variety of languages, etc. He did *not* just grab some ideas out of the air and declare them perfect. Example: for the word "and," he wanted to use either the Greek or the Latin word, since "and" is different in almost every modern language. The Latin word is "et," which does not clearly separate words. The (classical) Greek word is "kaj," which has a sharp, distinct sound, and which Zamenhof adopted. Another good example is gender endings. Many European languages force every noun to have a masculine or feminine ending. In English, this isn't true — you can talk about tables or democracies without worrying about their gender. When Zamenhof studied English, he thought that this was a good idea and would save a lot of unnecessary work. So nouns in Esperanto, like nouns in English, do not have a gender.

## WHERE IS IT USED?

It's used in about 100 countries all over the world. Every major country has UEA delegates and a national Esperanto organization. Esperanto is probably strongest in Europe, where it began, and where the language barriers are very obvious. We've had reports that twenty percent of the people in Bulgaria are Esperantists. (For some reason, Bulgarians are particularly interested in languages.)

It is used extensively in only a few places. One of these is Kameoka, Japan, where the Oomoto religion — similar to the Bahai faith — has adopted Esperanto as an official language. Another is the Bona Espero group in Brazil. You might mention the World Conventions, where people from many lands (and many national languages) get along excellently using Esperanto.

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## HOW MANY PEOPLE USE IT?

I think the best figures are from the World Almanac and Book of Facts (1990), which says two million people currently speak Esperanto. I checked with the professor who supplied that number, and he has done studies, extensive surveys, etc. (He replied in Esperanto.)

Other than that, there don't seem to be any very solid figures. There's no good way to keep track of Esperantists, since many don't belong to organizations and some belong to multiple organizations. Besides, many people teach themselves from books, independently of any organization. The UEA keeps track of certain reported figures, which make interesting numbers to present, such as number of students and classes, membership figures in the national Esperanto groups, UEA membership figures, etc. I have heard estimates all the way from one million to *fifteen* million! You can just mention this range, and the fact that it's hard to get accurate figures. (If they complain, ask them how they would find out how many stamp collectors there are in the world.)

Old UEA Jarlibros, or ESPERANTO EN PERSPEKTIVO, have the figures mentioned above.

## HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN AROUND?

It's been around since 1887. This may sound like a long time, and it leads directly to the next question.

I generally don't supply this little fact at the beginning of a conversation. The next question is answerable, and I think we can answer it very well, but it can affect the discussion poorly at the start. We must *never* hide any facts about Esperanto — but I feel it's okay to present this one later rather than earlier.

## HOW COME IT HASN'T SUCCEEDED YET?

A good question. The answer is not simple, so be prepared for a long explanation. Nonetheless the following items describe most or all of the delay in Esperanto's success.

The best response may well be to boldly state that Esperanto *has* succeeded. In about a century, it has gone from one speaker — Zamenhof — to around two million — and it has done this without ever forcing people to use it. Most languages that spread fast coerced people, either economically or militarily. Or, they were mandatory subjects in schools. Esperanto's spread has been purely voluntary! And it's being used right now, by tourists, for correspondence, by some businesses, at many international meetings.

There are good reasons why Esperanto has not had even more success. For one thing, it's entirely a volunteer, grass-roots movement. There are no major governments supporting it, no big foundations funding it. Too often, Esperanto groups do no advertising or recruiting, or do so at a completely amateurish level — it's hard to accomplish much without any professional organizers, publicity people, or fundraisers.

Also, many people never bother to reach outside their own language group, so they muddle along in total ignorance of other countries. Or they end up communicating in fractured English, with varying degrees of comprehension. Often people will put up with anything to avoid learning a language, even a relatively easy one like Esperanto. (Esperanto is far easier to learn, but it still takes time and study. And after their experiences with other languages, who would want to try another one?) Plus, many people have not yet even heard of it.

Those who do hear of it sometimes ignore it because it is not yet used by many other people. This “chicken and egg” problem is a major difficulty — everyone's waiting for other peo-

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ple to learn it first. Fortunately, Esperanto can spread (if not as fast) because of people who are willing to learn it now. See “What’s in it for me?” for some reasons to learn Esperanto; also “Does it really have a chance?” for a reply that directly challenges people to learn it.

Esperanto was also set back by personal disagreements in the early decades of its existence, and by the World Wars. International communication was rather frowned upon during the World Wars, plus everyone had other things to do. WW II also saw the Nazis destroy many Esperanto libraries in Europe — Esperanto wasn’t Aryan, and it had been created by a Jew. Between and after the wars, however, Esperanto has steadily grown.

(Another point is that many good ideas have taken decades or centuries to catch on. Arabic numerals took a few hundred years to spread, despite their clear superiority over Roman numerals. Democracy has existed in its modern form for a couple of centuries, but has not yet spread everywhere. Esperanto will not take the world by storm, either, but it is spreading, one person at a time.)

Some people may suspect that the problem is flaws in the language. That’s very unlikely, because many modifications of Esperanto have been tried and none of them have even caught up to Esperanto.

So there are lots of answers as to why Esperanto “hasn’t succeeded” yet... but it takes a while to explain.

## **DOES IT REALLY HAVE A CHANCE?**

I think so. I would not be spending time on Esperanto if it were just a hobby. The need for a neutral second language grows every year, and we are making progress in many countries. Lately we’ve had particular success in Third World and Asian countries. Figures from the UEA Jarlibro show a slow but steady increase in Esperanto broadcasts, classes, groups, etc. The facts are that Esperanto has continuously spread except during world wars (and if another one of those happens, all bets are off anyway).

I feel that there are two main competitors to Esperanto: English, because of its economic leverage, and computers. In the next thirty years, it is possible that computers will become small enough and smart enough so that people could have translation machines surgically implanted and directly linked to the brain. For those of you who say that computers will never be able to translate, let me remind you that two-year-olds can learn a language... computers will be able to do the same, some day. But it may be a long time, and many people may not be able to afford them, whereas everyone needs an international language right now.

A useful answer when you’re talking to someone may be something like this: “It’s up to *you*. Esperanto spreads one person at a time. If individuals decide not to learn Esperanto, it won’t succeed; if they do learn it, it will succeed. If everyone waits for someone else to learn it first, no, it won’t catch on. But you’re someone else’s ‘someone else’ — if you learn it, that’s one more reason for other people to learn it too.”

## **BUT THE BIBLE SAYS...?**

You’ll have to decide for yourself whether this kind of question is worth answering. We don’t really want to argue with people, and this question leads directly into arguments; so I recommend that you not even try. But if you insist...

One person pointed out that, according to Revelations, everyone would use the same language when the Apocalypse comes. We could have responded that we don’t want everyone to use Esperanto, just those who have some kind of interest in other countries; or that Esperanto is not intended to replace other languages. As it happened, we were so stunned that we didn’t say anything and the person went away.

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The only other time this came up, a person said that eventually the “perfect language” — Hebrew — would be used everywhere, justifying it on a Biblical passage, but that in the meantime Esperanto is a fine idea.

A potential Biblical objection is that a common language is no longer allowed, after the problems at the tower of Babel. No one has yet brought that up with me; if they do, I will not try hard to change their minds.

If you decide to argue Bible, Zephaniah 3:9 seems to approve of an international language. After warning that people are going to get into a lot of trouble by not observing religious regulations properly (read the entire thing — it’s only four pages) the text says:

“For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent.”

## WHAT DOES IT SOUND LIKE?

It sounds similar to Italian or Spanish. It has a lot of vowels, which makes it pleasant-sounding. This is a good point to grab a “That Works” brochure or something with the “Test Your Language Ability” paragraph and read it to them... or even have *them* read it! As in the next question, be prepared to say something in it.

If you read anything less immediately understandable than the “Test Your Language Ability,” you should probably tell them the English translation *first*, so it doesn’t just sound like foreign gibberish — then review it with them so they can recognize words and feel some immediate success!

## CAN YOU SPEAK IT? / SAY SOMETHING IN IT?

You *will* get asked this! Prepare something simple: maybe just “Mia nomo estas David kaj mi povas paroli Esperanton.” For a more emphatic approach, try “Esperanto estas la universala lingvo por la mondo.” Sometimes you will be asked how to say a particular phrase. If you can’t handle it, say so, or call over a more experienced Esperantist, or fake it. They don’t speak it anyway... but faking it should generally be avoided. (You should know at least some Esperanto. You will have zero credibility if you tell other people to learn Esperanto when you don’t speak it.)

Also, you can respond as in “What does it sound like?” They’ll be more impressed when *they* can speak Esperanto without any practice!

You may be asked to say or read something longer. Remember: Estu preta!

## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

And, what’s the alphabet like? These should be easy to answer. When you show someone a sample, you may want to warn them that it will look foreign at first glance. You’ve probably already told them how easy it is, so point out that it really is a foreign language, and it’s a lot easier to learn than it may look. Explain why the funny characters exist, point out words that are like the English (or any other language they may recognize), and so on.

## **BUT ENGLISH IS SO EXPRESSIVE...?**

What people mean by this is that English has a very large vocabulary, allowing you to pick a word that has exactly the right shade of meaning. English has something like 500,000 words! Two things to note, however: those half-million words allow great precision, but they must be *learned* before they can be used. Esperanto uses a much smaller set of words with a clearly defined set of affixes to expand its vocabulary without as much brain strain. Also, no one uses anything like 500,000 words. The average person's vocabulary is closer to 10,000 or 20,000 words, and their daily working vocabulary is even less. A large part of English vocabulary is obsolete words, obscure words, or technical vocabulary.

Furthermore, the word order in English is fairly restricted to subject-verb-object. Esperanto allows inverting or rearranging the word order, thereby letting a writer or speaker emphasize parts of a sentence in a way that English cannot. (My own favorite example of this is the sentence "Mi amas vin," which can be rearranged "Mi vin amas." The second way seems cozier, with the people adjacent and the verb out of the way... *sigh*.)

## **THERE'S NO ESPERANTO LITERATURE, IS THERE?**

On the contrary! Let's split this into two parts: translated works from other languages, and original works. First, the most important works from each language are the first things translated into Esperanto, so it has the major books and poetry from dozens of languages. Examples: English has contributed Shakespeare; Chinese has contributed Mao Zedong's poetry; Hebrew has contributed the Old Testament.

As far as original works, Esperanto is undoubtedly the favorite second language for authors. There are many original novels, nonfiction books, and poetry collections in Esperanto. Have samples available, and get ELNA's book list.

## **BUT THERE'S NO ESPERANTO CULTURE, RIGHT?**

Well, there aren't any countries which use Esperanto exclusively. But there nonetheless is some culture... a very international, educated, and inquisitive culture! Esperanto attracts those who are interested in other lands and other ways of life, and these people contribute their own literature, customs, foods, opinions to the world wide Esperanto culture. How is this culture transmitted? Through magazines, newsletters, correspondence, and through the numerous international conventions. True, it's not like most cultures that are tied to a particular land, or to a particular religion, or to a particular national heritage... it's a culture that's tied to a language and a way of viewing one's fellow humans.

In addition (or as an alternate answer), Esperanto makes the cultures of *many* lands available to you, for just the price of a book or a magazine subscription, or even just the price of overseas mail.

## **WHERE IS IT TAUGHT? / WHERE CAN I LEARN IT?**

A superb question! Have an answer ready. You probably have the Free Postal Course, so that's one possibility. The San Francisco summer courses are a possibility, but they cost more, only happen once a year, and are far away for many people. (More summer courses are taking place nowadays. Ask ELNA for a list.) Also, sometimes classes are offered in nearby colleges or adult-ed courses. Make sure you know about these and can supply as much information as possible. Other possibilities are using the *Teach Yourself*, Richardson, or *Step by Step* books, explaining that it really is possible to become a fluent Esperantist just by studying a

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book... because Esperanto is so easy. Or, this is a good place to suggest that they join your local group, so they can meet people, practice, socialize, etc.

A side note here: every time a sort-of-interested person has to make an effort, there is a chance that we will lose him or her. Make things as easy as possible for them! If they ask about a dictionary, don't tell them to write to ELNA — they may put it off forever. Whip out a dictionary and tell them what it costs!

## **I HAVE ENOUGH TROUBLE WITH ENGLISH!**

This is a non-committal response from someone. It's supposed to be funny. You can reply, "But Esperanto is easier than English." But say it with a smile, give them some literature, etc.

## **BUT I CAN'T GO ANYWHERE AND JUST USE IT, CAN I?**

At this point, you'd want to plan ahead. There are plenty of stories about Esperantists who were found by other Esperantists because they were wearing their green star (it happened to me!), but you can't be sure of finding an Esperantist just anywhere. (Of course, they can meet plenty of people if they join your local group...)

There are some points that offset this somewhat. First, there are plenty of uses for Esperanto in spite of this. Second, if you can plan ahead, you can find out where other Esperantists are — the UEA Jarlibro has lists of UEA delegates and Esperanto groups in each country. (In the 1980s, Joel Brozovsky budgeted \$7,000 to travel around Europe via Esperanto. He was able to make it last *three years!*) You can also tell them about Pasporta Servo — try to have even an out-of-date list to show them. Try asking them this: if they spoke, let's say, French, how easily could they find a fellow French speaker in a country other than France? Like Japan? (But the first point is probably a stronger argument.)

You may want to point out that this is exactly the main reason that Esperanto is not yet used everywhere: too many people, like your target, are waiting for everyone else to learn Esperanto first. Tell them to help get things going! It's better to help out at the beginning than to wait until others have done all the work.

You can also try this line, even though I'd consider it a last resort: investing time in Esperanto may give you a lower return than some other language, but it involves a far lower cost. The return on investment is better — more bang for the buck!

## **I DON'T LIKE THE FEMININE SUFFIX...**

The best response seems to be that, for a language started in the late 1800s, Esperanto is remarkably nonsexist — more so than most national languages. In addition, the feminine suffix "-in-" doesn't mean that everything without the suffix is masculine; it's just a way of being precise when necessary. For example, in English, "lioness" is a specifically female lion, but "lion" is of indeterminate gender. Also, Esperanto has an interesting prefix that means "both sexes": "ge-", as in "gepatroj", meaning parents of both sexes, or both parents. I have seen "ge-" used with a *singular* noun (as "gepatro") to specifically indicate "male *or* female." Some suggestions have been made for a specifically masculine suffix — Esperanto can grow, if need be — but, to date, none have caught on very well. ("-ab-" was one such suggestion, from the Hebrew word for "father;" also "-iĉ," as in panjo/paĉjo=in/iĉ, although it's easily confused with "-iĝ-." Also, "vir-" is sometimes used as a prefix to indicate "specifically male," as in "virbovo.")



We should recognize that some people have justifiable concerns about this, but we should also point out that this flaw is not sufficient reason to reject a language that is pretty good in most other ways, and that many people have already learned. Esperanto can grow, but only if *Esperantists* want it to change — encourage these people to learn it and show others the need for such growth. They certainly won't have this kind of chance to influence any other language! Esperanto is not a ship that sails in just one direction, but rather an ocean upon which all may sail their own ships wherever they desire.

You might try: languages aren't sexist — it's the people who use them who are or are not sexist. And a particularly argumentative response (therefore malrecommended!): If Esperanto had a neutral base word and a masculinizing ending (eg, “viro” being “person” or “woman,” and “virabo” meaning “male person”), would that be sexist favoring women... or would it be sexist favoring men, since males are specially indicated?

## **I DON'T LIKE THE SUPERSCRIPTS...**

Frankly, I'm not thrilled about them either. But if we start fiddling with the language to make it perfect, we'll fiddle with it forever and won't accomplish anything. It's better to go along with something that's pretty good, and make changes after it's been accepted. Superscripts can be faked on a typewriter by overstriking with an apostrophe, or by writing them in by hand. If you can't use accents, Zamenhof recommended using an “H” after an accented consonant, instead of an accent mark (giving CH, GH, HH, JH, SH), and ignoring the superscript over U. (On a Macintosh with Microsoft Word, use Word's formula command for overstriking: `\o(letter,^)` where “\” is command-option-backslash. Also, `\o(letter,.s \up3(^))` for superscripts over capital letters. Option-N and option-> are the accent marks in many fonts.) ELNA has some Esperanto fonts; and the ISO Latin-3 standard includes Esperanto characters, so the problem will decline as computer manufacturers adopt the newer standards.

The reason for the superscripts is so that each sound can be represented by its own letter, with a reasonable number of sounds (28) and without using combinations of letters to create new sounds.

It's also worth noting that other important languages use a variety of superscripts and accent marks, such as French, but people rarely complain about those.

## **I DON'T LIKE THE ACCUSATIVE...**

The accusative (direct object) ending is one that English speakers are not used to, and it therefore looks strange. However, it's common in many other languages, and it adds a great deal to Esperanto. It allows us to rearrange sentences into more pleasing sequences almost at will, so that we can emphasize what needs emphasizing instead of being bound into a single format. (Also, English does have some words that change according to their use: the pronouns. In English, “he, she, we” et cetera become “him, her, us” — whereas Esperanto at least changes them from subject to object consistently.)

## **WHY NOT USE PREPOSITIONS INSTEAD OF ENDINGS? (And similar nit-picking linguistic questions)**

The easiest way to get rid of this question is to claim that you are not an expert in linguistics (after all, you're not) and that you don't know why. A small number of endings for the most frequently used grammatical constructions (such as direct objects and plurals) is common in most languages, avoids cluttering speech with a few prepositions that are used in almost every

sentence, and just happens to be the way Esperanto was set up. See the question about the accusative for a related topic.

And, in fact, you *can* use prepositions instead of the accusative! But this is not the usual style.

## **LANGUAGE TEACHERS...**

Language teachers may dislike Esperanto because they think that it will make them obsolete. Well, maybe some day, but for the next few decades it should actually make language teachers *more* important. Esperanto is an excellent introduction to other languages. Students can learn one of the most important parts of language studies — how languages are put together — without memorizing lists of exceptions and rules. Therefore they become much more interested in languages — all languages — since their first foreign language experience was not traumatic. They also learn much vocabulary and grammar that will be useful in studying the European languages. Studies have shown that students who take two years of Esperanto plus two years of a national language actually learn that national language *better* than students who take it for four years. Also, language teachers should be able to pick up Esperanto very quickly, if they want to teach it. How else could they improve their professional skills so easily?

Making language studies easier can only help the job market for instructors.

## **BUT IF YOU REALLY WANT TO LEARN ABOUT A PARTICULAR CULTURE...**

If someone wants to learn about a particular culture in detail, then no, Esperanto is not the proper tool. Learning the national language would be the best course. Tell the truth: Esperanto was never intended to be used for everything, it was intended for international use, and there are some things it just isn't best for.

On the other hand, how likely are they to really become fluent in that national language? Esperanto can be as useful as a partially learned language — maybe better. And if you want to know a little bit about a lot of other lands, Esperanto would be more useful than a national language.

## **IS IT BIGGER THAN A BREADBOX?**

I don't know how to answer this one. Actually, I've never run into it. But you'll hit some weirdos...

## **WON'T IT EVENTUALLY BREAK UP INTO DIALECTS?**

This question only comes from people who are really into languages or history. Other major languages, such as Latin, broke up into a variety of local dialects which eventually became entirely separate languages. However, this was due to the isolation between the various groups who used the original language. Any time that groups of people communicate, the languages they use tend to absorb words, structures, and so on from each other. There are an amazing number of pidgin languages — just about everywhere that two languages met along a common border, traders created a mixed language. So, in today's world, the vastly improved communications networks will prevent Esperanto from breaking up. As an example, English has drifted quite a lot in the last 200 years... but, except for a few words and idioms, it's still the same language in the U.S., the UK, Canada, and Australia. Why? Because these countries

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communicate with each other a lot. The radio, TV, and computer networks of the present and future will ensure that Esperantists all over the world can check each other's Esperanto easily and frequently.

Besides, Esperantists seem to have an unwritten grammatical rule that prevents linguistic drift: "Any Esperantist can correct any other Esperantist under any circumstances!"

## **HAS THE LANGUAGE CHANGED AT ALL SINCE IT BEGAN?**

The structure of the language has not changed. The basic rules are fixed, and Zamenhof himself urged that they should not be changed until Esperanto is used worldwide. Otherwise, we could fiddle with the grammar forever. The only grammatical changes occurred very early in Esperanto's history, when some of the correlative endings were modified to remove some ambiguities. The vocabulary, however, has shifted somewhat. For example, the original 900 word vocabulary included a word for "matchmaker"... that's hardly ever used any more. Plus, of course, new words are constantly being adopted for new needs.

One other shift is that the letter "ĥ" is gradually being replaced by "k".

One of the consequences of this linguistic stability is that Esperanto literature will become obsolete far more slowly than that of other languages. For example, reading Shakespeare exposes you to hundreds of words, idioms, and even grammatical structures that are no longer used. But a 300-year-old Esperanto text would probably be very easy to follow, except for obsolete words. (This is an obscure point that, for some reason, fascinates some people.)

## **HOW DO NEW WORDS GET ADDED?**

This question is related to the one above, and you'll get it now and then. The same as with any language... if people use a new word enough, it spreads. International words such as "telephone" merely have the spelling modified to fit Esperanto spelling and pronunciation. And eventually, if they are really used by people, the Language Committee makes them official. Often, though, a new word can be built out of existing roots and affixes, which also keeps down the number of words to be learned. (For example, "vendejaro" will mean "shopping mall" to any modern Esperantist, even though these didn't exist in Zamenhof's day — possibly a good example.)

## **HOW MANY WORDS ARE THERE IN ESPERANTO?**

The latest major all-Esperanto dictionary, *Plena Ilustrita Vortaro*, contains approximately 16,000 root words. This is around the number of words that an educated person would be using. Plus, the regular word formation techniques that Esperanto uses expands these words by perhaps a factor of ten... for around 160,000 words.

## **WHERE CAN I GET IN TOUCH WITH ESPERANTISTS OR CLUBS?**

Have your address ready! Get their names and addresses too, so you can send them information or an invitation to your next meeting. And have your next meeting already set up. (If there's no group in your area, start one. Contact me or ELNA for advice.) In the U.S., tell them about ELNA. Addresses are at the end of this article. Tell everyone about the 800-number!

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People with computers can contact the newsgroup `soc.culture.esperanto`, or check out the dozens of mailing lists at Yahoo!Groups. ELNA has a website (see “Addresses” at end) and you can easily find hundreds of Esperanto websites.

## HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN ESPERANTO?

This question comes up occasionally, so have a reasonable answer ready. Probably, it was one of the items listed above under “What’s in it for me?” Don’t be afraid to say that you could care less about saving the world, you just like languages, or vice versa. But also point out that your personal reasons are not the only ones... then mention the rest.

## AREN’T WE BETTER OFF IF WE CAN’T TALK TO OTHER PEOPLE?

This is a rare argument. Sometimes people will point out that civil wars (within a language group) are the bloodiest, or that if you can’t understand an insult, you won’t get into trouble. The first argument does not mean much, as civil wars don’t start *because* a language is shared — they have other causes, and, in fact, language differences cause many problems. (Examples: the antagonism in Quebec between English and French speakers, in Belgium between Flemish and Walloon, in the U.S. between English and Spanish.) In a war between nations, not knowing how to say “I surrender” has cost many soldiers their lives.

As for the second argument, international peace does not occur when nations remain ignorant of each other. It has historically happened when countries are tied together with bonds of travel, business, and other shared interests. Examples: the best allies of the United States are those countries that speak English — even though one of them was once our ruler! Even the long war between us has been submerged beneath decades of peaceful trade — and communication.

## HAS ANYONE FAMOUS EVER SUPPORTED ESPERANTO?

Yes, some have. The famous linguist **Mario Pei** wrote a book, *One Language for the World*, supporting Esperanto: “The outstanding advantage of Esperanto among constructed languages lies in the fact that it has been tested and tried, in both spoken and written form, and found to work to a highly satisfactory extent for all sorts of people, not merely language scholars.” French President **François Mitterrand** ran for office on a platform that included encouraging Esperanto as an elective course in secondary schools. A president of Austria, **Franz Jonas**, was a lifelong Esperantist. **Albert Einstein**: “For international communication, international understanding helped by an international language is not only necessary but self-evident. Esperanto is the best solution for the idea of an international language.” **Leo Tolstoy** (Russian author, 1828-1910: “The time needed to learn Esperanto is so small, and the results of learning it potentially so great, that no educated person should reject the opportunity of doing so.”) **J. B. Tito** (President of Yugoslavia, 1892-1980: “I think that the study of Esperanto is very necessary at present... Esperanto has a truly universal character.”) The soccer superstar **Pele** speaks Esperanto. The founder of the Boy Scouts, Lord **Baden-Powell**, picked Esperanto as the Jamboree Language (not that it’s used that way yet).

**Ralph Harry**, Australia’s ambassador to the UN, strongly supported Esperanto. **Harry Harrison**, the science fiction author, mentioned Esperanto frequently in his *Stainless Steel Rat* series. The author/humorist/composer **Steve Allen** starred in a videotape, “The World of Esperanto with Steve Allen,” describing Esperanto. Others: various Popes, Upton Sinclair (author), David McCallum (British actor). And many famous people have said Esperanto sounds like a good idea, without specifically supporting it.

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## LESS COMMON QUESTIONS

Here are some questions that rarely come up, but which you may want to be prepared for anyway.

What journals and publications are available in Esperanto, especially locally? Answer: Various things, but only through the local group or through ELNA. None are in general distribution. Newsletters, El Popola Ĉinio, Heroldo de Esperanto, Esperanto (the UEA's magazine), and others are available. Have a book list ready.

Has Esperanto been recognized by anyone official? Yes. The League of Nations recognized it as potentially useful. (But see "But English is already the international language" to see why that never succeeded.) UNESCO has recognized Esperanto as being in accordance with its aims and goals. The international telegraphy union accepts Esperanto as a "clear" language, i.e., not at the higher rates for a code.

Because of its logical structure and regularity, does Esperanto sacrifice any beauty? I don't think so. People have written novels and poetry in Esperanto (poets are allowed to drop endings to create ambiguity or preserve meter), and I've even seen *two* translations of Jabberwocky in Esperanto. Another response that gets sympathy is, "To me, a beautiful language is one that I can learn in less than five years." Or point out that just the grammar is logical, the language is used by ordinary people, for ordinary everyday things that any language is used for.

What do you see as the future of Esperanto? Good things! Because of its advantages, Esperanto will continue to spread, one person at a time for a while. Eventually, I think it will reach the point where every educated person will want to know it, and where it will be regularly taught in schools.

Can Esperanto help world unity? Yes. It lets people from all countries communicate freely and as equals, neither of which is currently possible.

Is there a worldwide Esperanto organization? Yes. Tell them about the UEA and what it does.

How would Esperanto be as a language for a space settlement? Unless Americans are the only ones to go into space, there will probably be a language problem, and Esperanto would be just as good a solution there as here. Maybe better, if we started spreading it early enough.

You're trying to homogenize the world! On the contrary. We're trying to help people learn more about other cultures. People will certainly keep those things that make them unique.

How about the XYZ created language instead of Esperanto as an international language? If XYZ is so good, why has Esperanto survived and XYZ died out? Remind people of the social investment in Esperanto — the books and magazines already translated that would have to be re-translated, the millions of people who have learned Esperanto and enriched it with their ideas, the decades of experience with it. Anything other than Esperanto will have to have a great advantage to be worthwhile; a ten percent improvement just isn't enough, considering the ground that would be lost.

How about sign language or gestures as international languages? The "A" in ASL means "American." Sign languages differ significantly from country to country. And gestures are worse: in many cultures, the "OK" symbol and thumbs-up are actually obscene gestures.

Is it taught in any schools? Not as a regular course, to my knowledge. Various summer courses and adult ed courses exist, some of them for college credit. Contact ELNA for details.

## MISCELLANEOUS SUGGESTIONS

Some things to remember when talking to people:

*Key points:* You can learn Esperanto at least *four times faster* than other languages! (Watch people's eyes light up when you say this.) About *two million people* speak it. And... *it's fun!* You *must* make these points, otherwise Esperanto has no advantage over other languages.

Be friendly, attentive, and helpful. *The first impression is the most important.*

Try to get to "yes": answer their questions first by agreeing with them ("Yes, the accent marks *are* unusual, but..."), or ask questions that they have to answer "yes" ("Wouldn't you like to learn a foreign language?").

Have a goal: Are you trying to simply inform people? Get them to take a Lesson 1? Come to a meeting? Sign up for a class? Donate their life savings?

Don't mix messages. Even though Esperanto and Frelbianism are, to you, obviously linked, keep them separate. Otherwise you confuse people and you give them an extra reason to reject you.

If you are at a table during an exhibition, get a can or cup of something to drink — you'll be doing a lot of talking and your throat will thank you!

## AFTERWORD

The following words were written in 1831 by William Lloyd Garrison, in the first issue of his abolitionist newspaper THE LIBERATOR. You may find them inspirational.

"I am in earnest; I will not equivocate; I will not excuse; I will not retreat a single inch; and *I will be heard.*"

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