

# How can constructed language be used to increase inclusiveness in our societies?

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# Introduction

Growing up in Norway, I have always been told that people in my country have equal opportunities in life, and that our freedom comes with living in a welfare state. Looking at our immigration policies however, it becomes clear that Norway does not provide equal opportunities for all, beyond our own borders. Instead, regulation of immigration separates Norwegians as people from the rest of the world, making us as habitants the “lucky ones”.

With nations come language, and with language come invisible borders. The level of fluency in one’s language can sometimes create the illusion that

certain groups do not belong, simply because they are different from the rest in the way they speak.

In this project I will be researching potential solutions to issues related to language barriers and lack of fluency. I will not attempt to speak from an immigrant’s perspective or to develop a solution to any specific immigration issue. Rather I will explore constructed language as a platform and tool for welcomeness, as I attempt to develop a communication solution for an envisioned society where linguistic hegemony is cast aside in favour of inclusivity.

# Handicapped by our mother tongues

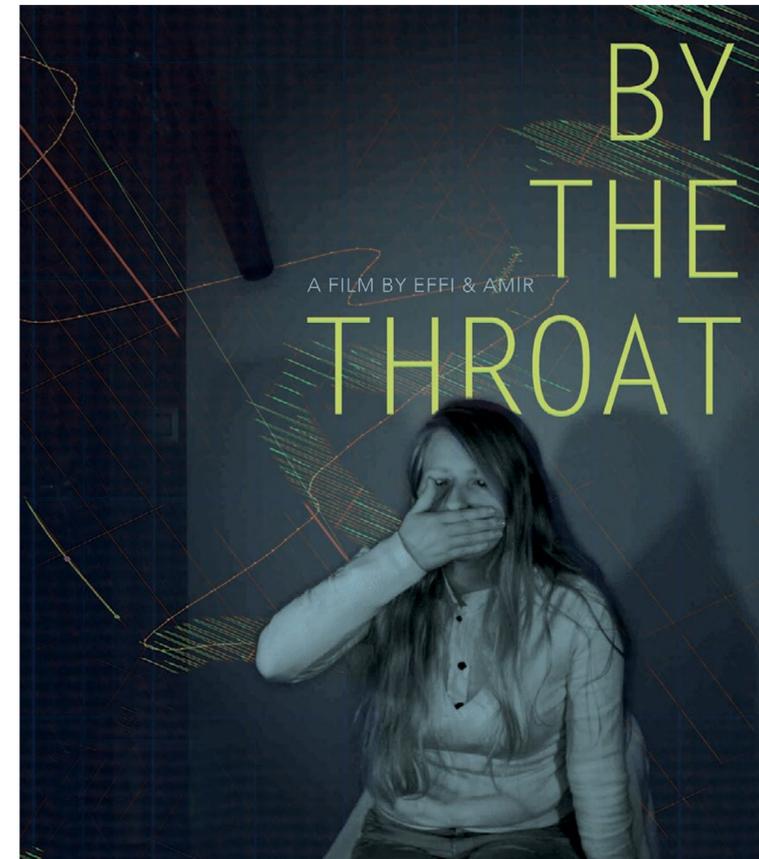
In the film *By the Throat*, we meet a man who explains how when crossing the Jordan river, guards ask crossers to pronounce a specific word, for then to use their pronunciation of the letter “S” to determine whether or not the crossers are Hebrew (and thus allowed to cross the river) (Amir Borenstein and Effi Weiss, 2021). Within the blink of an eye, the guard is able to separate people based on cultural backgrounds – ranking one out of two groups as superior.

In our language lies details about our state of origin, economic situation, and in essence who we are – at least on paper. Our language is a reflection of our identity, and if a border guard is able to judge us based on fluency, surely the every day person can do the same. On the other side, fluency becomes a benefit for the fluent party at the negotiating table, where non-fluent speakers are less able to express

themselves compared to the fluent ones (Garvía, 2015). The non-fluent speaker is in other words handicapped by his or her mother tongue, and by extension his or her social and national background.

I would like to argue that if our aspiration is to transition into a truly equal society, we will need to find a way of discarding this benefit of fluency in language.

Fig. 1: Borenstein and Weiss 2021.  
*By the Throat*. [film poster]



# An equal communication platform

If separate languages have the ability to act as invisible borders in our societies, surely a shared language should have the ability to bring down those same invisible borders.

As mentioned, language reflects our identities. This can be a handicap in the fight for equality. However, I do not see the discardment of our identities as a viable solution. Rather than arguing for leaving ourselves behind as we strive to see eye to eye, I would like to explore solutions where we as people

can “meet halfway” (Paul Wilson, 2019), welcoming each other in an equal space of communication.

In order for this communication space to be equal however, we might need to cast aside our social and national backgrounds momentarily. In this space we should meet as people, rather than as citizens, workers and economic numbers.

# A language built to be felt

In her article “*We Can’t Feel Our Language*”: *Making Places in the City*, Natalie Baloy looks at native language revitalisation and how aboriginal language education could become part of the urban domain. A fascinating aspect of Baloy’s article is how Aboriginal language seems to be so connected to nature. Xálek’, a Squamish hereditary chief, told Baloy:

“I realized that it [the language] is the shape of our land. When the winds hit our mountains and they come over, they drop into the valleys, they kind of move around through the forest. That’s kind of the structure of the language – it has a lot of sharp inflections like that. [...] We adapt to our environment. Our language mimics that.” (Natalie J. K. Baloy, 2011)

Further, Baloy discusses her conversation with Jerilynn Webster, executive director of the Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association.

Webster explains that the languages are connected to one’s environment, and that if you’re not in that environment you can’t *feel* the language (Natalie J. K. Baloy, 2011).

The idea of feeling a language becomes interesting in relation to equal communication because it opens up the possibility of communicating on a non-verbal level – a spiritual and perhaps more intuition based type of communication. If we can begin to communicate using solely sensory methods, we might start to break down the invisible borders that arise due to our levels of fluency.

Up until now I have been discussing language as something that follows one’s mother tongue, rather than something that can be learnt. There is no denying however, that if a person with the right resources goes out to learn a new language, that person will probably manage to reach a fairly high level of fluency. Here, the word *resources* becomes important because it highlights a vital issue

with all languages – the fact that they can, and have to, be learnt. It is at the moment that a language can be learnt that fluency becomes a benefit, and this benefit will always be given to those with the right resources (and as extension, to those with the “right” social and economical background).

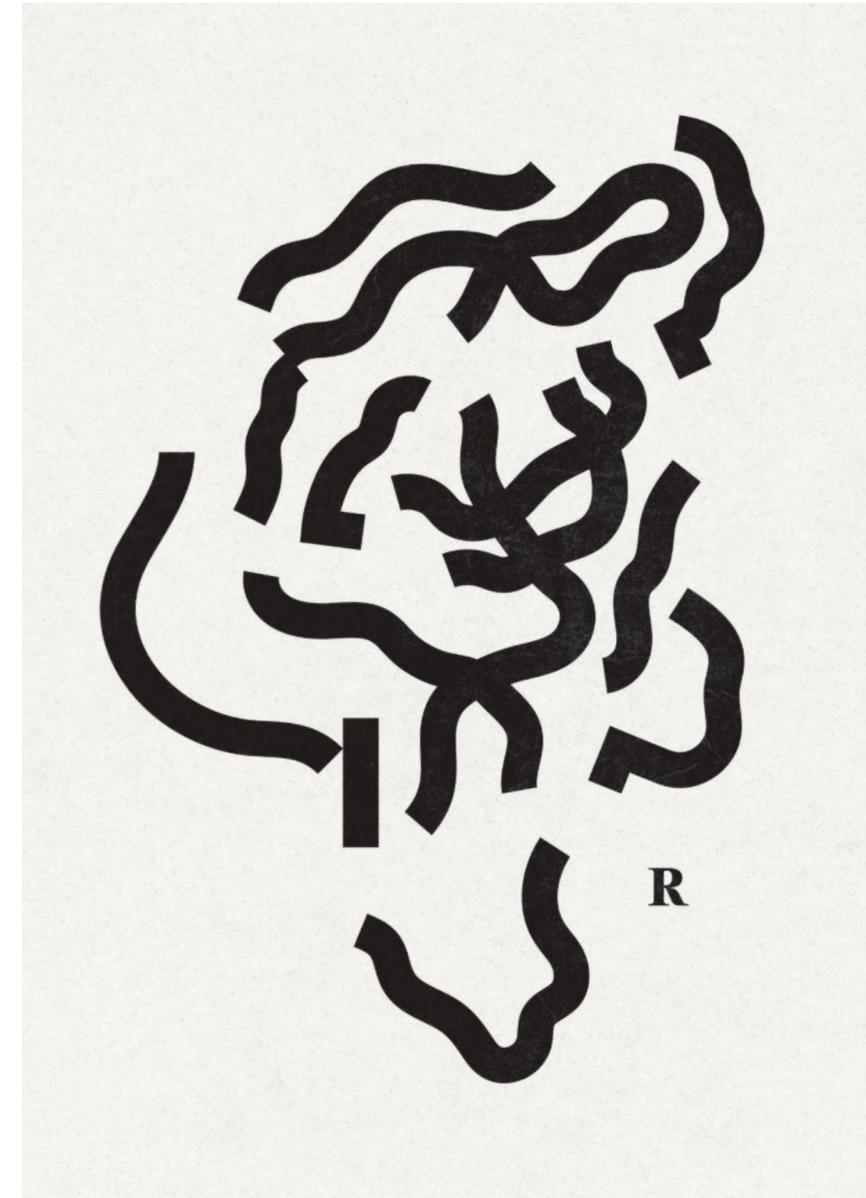
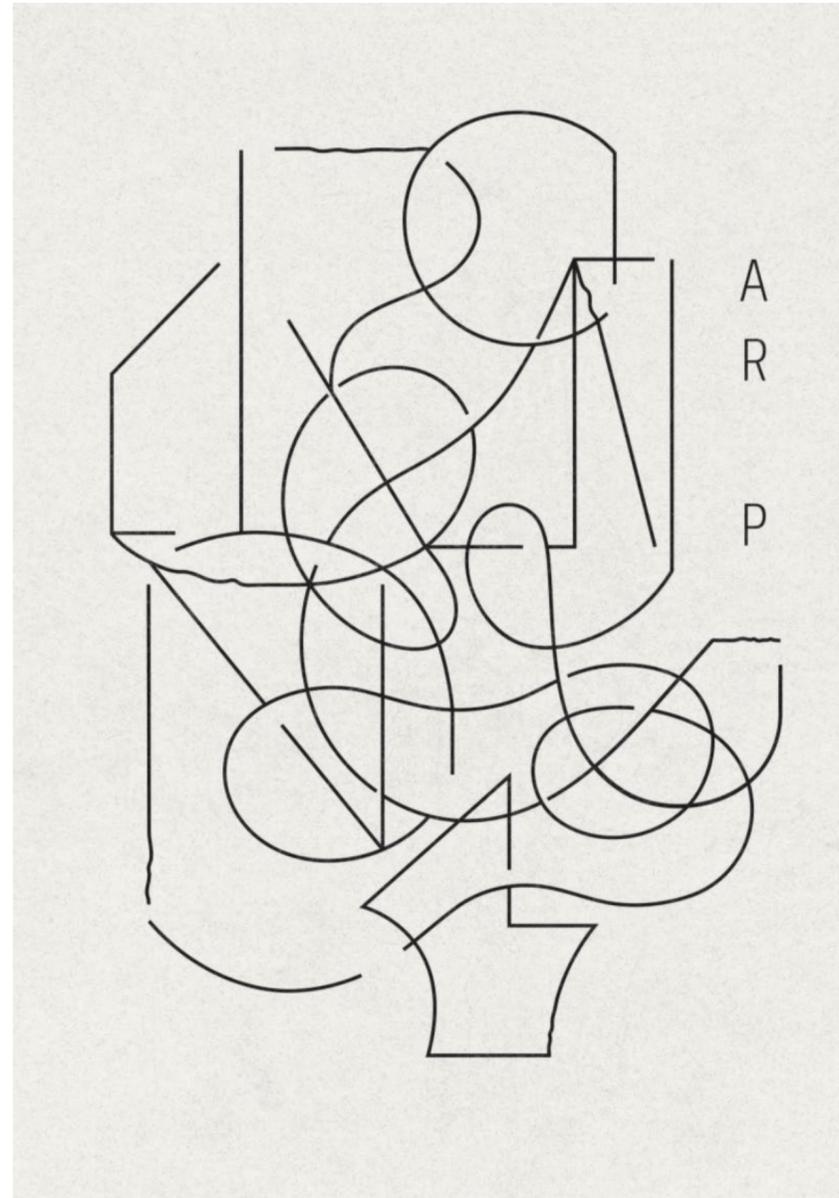
If we could develop a language then, which is to be felt rather than read, through initial interpretation that does not follow cultural symbolic customs – would we be able to present a solution to the issue of fluency? Perhaps if we were to remove the notion of fluency from language, we would be able to meet at an equal level of communication.

## Non-legible communication

In an interview about one of their typographic works, design studio Regular Practice suggests

that “when you don’t have any understanding of what something says or communicates, you can sort of look at it in a very different way, and appreciate it for different reasons” (Tom Finn and Kristoffer Soelling, 2020).

This notion of non-legible communication is also evident in the works of Przemek Bizon. In an interview, Bizon explains how he uses typography “as a starting point to search for a different means of expression” (Elfie Thomas, 2022). If Bizon’s non-legible work can express *something*, perhaps a way of communicating using feelings could be to replace legibility with non-legibility – resulting in an intuition-dependent visual language?



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Fig. 2: Bizon 2022. *Moreless.type* ARP. [linework]

→  
Fig. 3: Bizon 2022. *Moreless.type* R. [linework]

## Tests: Developing a constructed non-legible language

In order to test whether an intuition-dependent visual language could work, I have attempted to develop a set of non-verbal letterforms. In the following tests I have tried to communicate welcomeness, with the aim of greeting non-Norwegians to the country whilst also letting them in on Norwegian culture without them having to understand the Norwegian language.

Attempt 1 (Fig. 4) is inspired by Sumerian – the first written language, representing the fact that all people come from one shared beginning in time. Attempt 2 (Fig. 5) was initially developed to represent the lightness of Norwegian snow, however the swirly nature of the forms also nods to free movement across borders and the level of freedom we have as Norwegian citizens.

## A utopian solution

Reviewing these attempts at a non-verbal language, it quickly becomes clear that

when we as individuals interpret them, the communicated message translates differently to each individual. It becomes a symbol of subjectivity. I would also claim that as viewers, we can not read what we think should be readable, resulting in a feeling of exclusion and confusion, rather than inclusion as we observe the works.

More often than not, languages are shared amongst certain groups of people, and although literature in itself can be interpretable, the meanings of words are usually rather objective. Surely an equal communications platform would need to be inclusive rather than exclusive, and thus, the idea of a non-legible and highly subjective language becomes a utopian solution to my research, which I have not been able to sketch out properly.

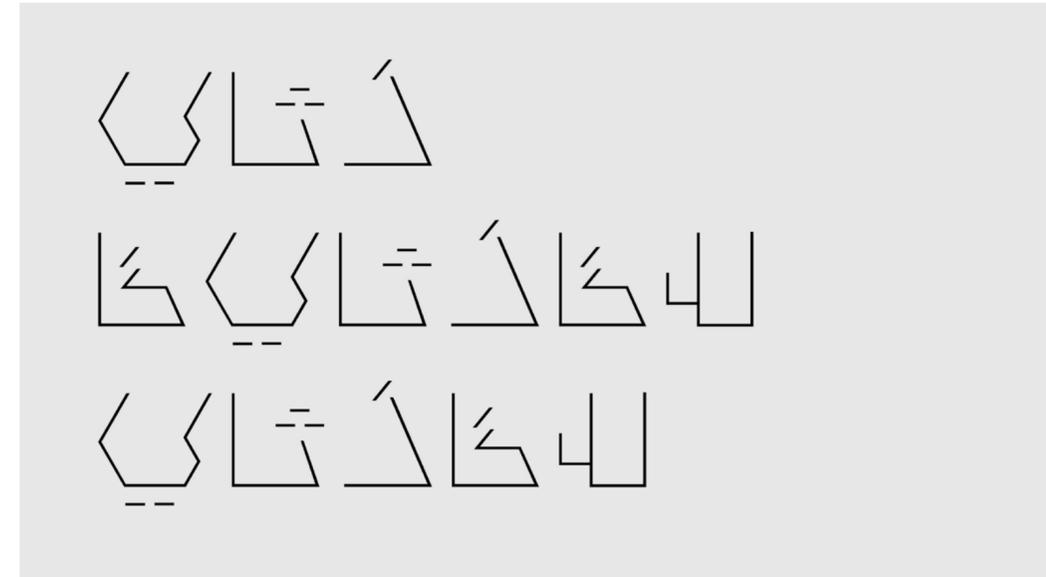


Fig. 4: Reigstad 2022. Sumerian conlang experiment

Fig. 5: Reigstad 2022. Swirly form experiment

# Constructed language as lingua franca

If an interpretable non-verbal language is no longer a relevant solution for my research, the next best concept for an equal communications platform might be a non-political lingua franca, known and taught to everyone.

## Linguistic hegemony

I have already discussed the benefit that follows fluency, and how resources come into play when a language can be learnt. However, moving forward I will pretend as if those issues do not exist, simply because I have not managed to reveal a way of tackling them through my research. But if fluency and resources are no longer issues to be tackled, why not simply state that today's lingua franca, English, should be used for all international communication, ensuring that all people in the world is taught it (for example through an international teaching programme).

In his article *Ideal Language*, Steven Laporte explains that although natural universal languages such as Latin and English have been successful in their ability to be universally understood, their successes are actually results of military and cultural domination (Laporte, 2018). Natural languages “are never neutral because they are typically laden with the cultural values of their countries of origin” (Laporte, 2018). Therefore, in an international context, natural languages such as English and Latin will always represent the power of one group, and the defeat of another.

As long as English remains the lingua franca, the power of English speaking nations and peoples will thus remain greater than the rest, resulting in a linguistic hegemony (Garvía, 2015). Since hegemony is not particularly compliant with equality and other topics I'm aiming to explore in my research, I shall go on to look at a non-political language, and how this language could act as the inclusive communication tool I've been hoping to

develop in my research.

## Esperanto as solution

In a study on the BRICS Language Dilemma, Byelongo Elisee Isheloke explores Esperanto as a possible solution to international communication issues. She concludes the study by recommending that South Africa (the country in question in Isheloke's study) should “Experiment with Esperanto for a more democratic communication system between countries, and to avoid linguistic colonisation” (Isheloke, 2019). Perhaps one way of solving the language dilemma of the world could be to ensure that every living person is taught Esperanto?

In his article, *Esperantujo, Land of the Hopeful*, Paul Wilson explains how Esperanto speakers are “in and out of their primary language, and therefore in and out of their cultures” (Paul

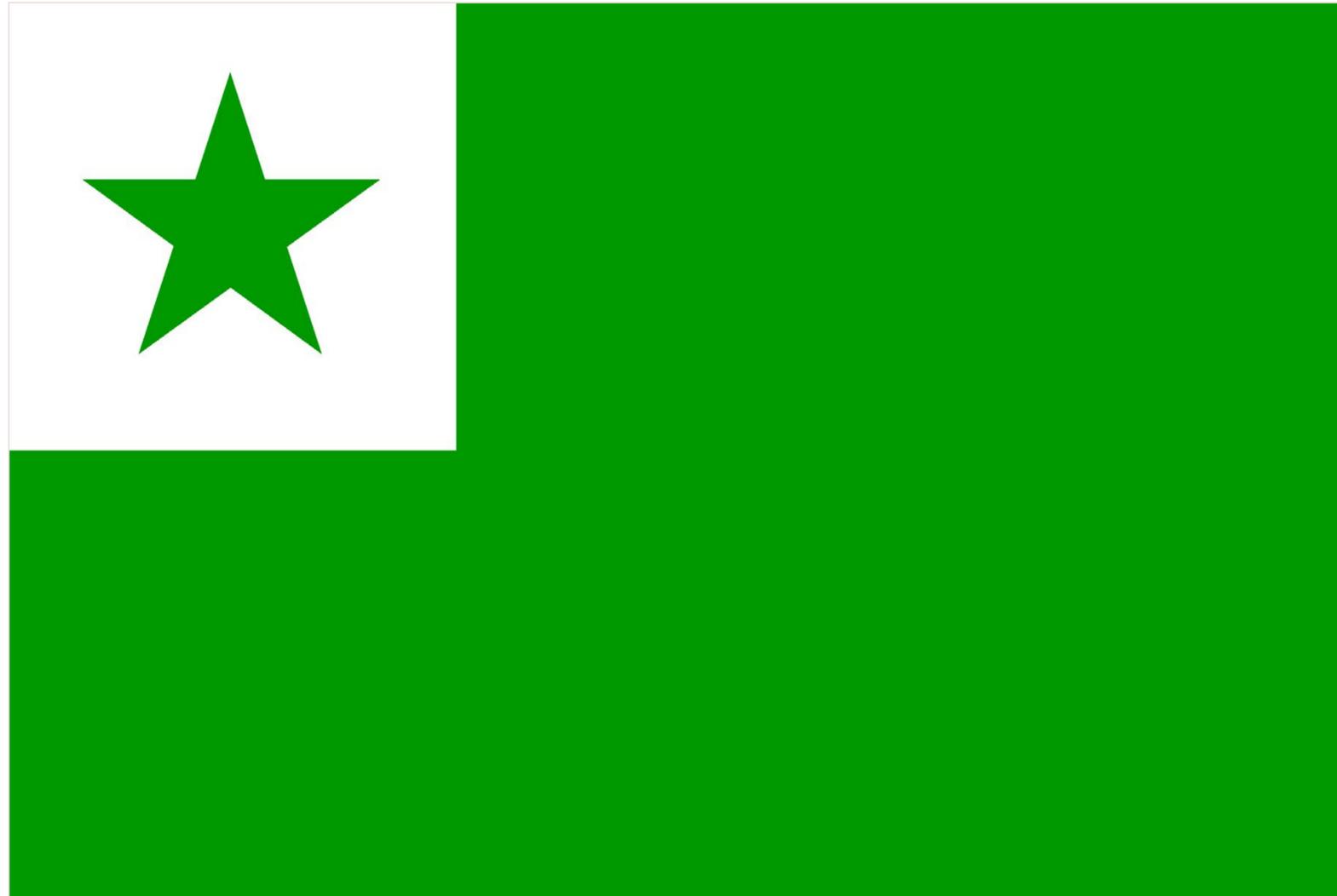


Fig. 6: Grundin 2007. *Flag of Esperanto*. [digital illustration]

Wilson, 2019). I interpret Wilson to suggest that when speaking Esperanto, people find a common ground, and by extension, a shared culture for all which becomes an addition to one's own.

Imagine if this common ground could be entered by all people of the world, as they come together in an inclusive space of communication where every person attempts to see eye to eye. From what I can tell, this is in fact what Esperanto is all about. In many ways, Esperanto acts as the solution I have attempted to develop in my initial tests, at least if one is to look away from the issues of fluency and available learning resources.

# The inner idea of Esperanto

Since Esperanto is both stateless and constructed (and thus rarely anybody's mother tongue), speaking it becomes an act of "meeting halfway" (Paul Wilson, 2019). Using the language is not a matter of giving up one's identity in favour of sameness, but rather of performing a diplomatic act of communication.

Esperanto was developed by Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, and is perhaps the most successful constructed language to date (Theil, 2022). In his linguistic work, Zamenhof was driven by the idea of “bringing together the whole human race”, an aspiration that was historically thought of as the world mission for the Jews (Garvía, 2015). As ideological as this may sound, the core of this mission – to end ethnic hatred and secure world peace (Garvía, 2015), very much resonates with the aspirations of this research.

I should mention that this “inner idea” of Esperanto, described by Zamenhof as a “constant celebration of humanity and human brotherhood” (Garvía, 2015), was not shared by all Esperantists (Garvía, 2015). Some rather saw politics and ideology as separate factors from the language, and thought that Esperanto should merely hold the position of an international non-political language (Garvía, 2015). In terms of my research however, I see the inner idea of Esperanto to be of most relevance, simply because this non-political politicalness makes the act of speaking Esperanto an inclusive one. By communicating in Esperanto, one could show the world that “I would like to meet all of you halfway in a space

of welcomeness and equality”.

In terms of linguistic qualities, Esperanto is in no way neutral however. When developing Esperanto, Zamenhof tried to always use the most common version of a word – the word that was seen most frequently across a range of languages (Christen, 1914). Yet, it would seem that Zamenhof mainly looked to Western languages when doing so, as the final Esperanto vocabulary is built up of 84% Romance languages and Latin, 14% Germanic languages and 2% other languages (Theil, 2022). Western representation aside, there is still reason to believe that Zamenhof’s intention was in fact democratic. He thought that although Esperanto had a set of foundational grammatical rules, the language belonged to its community, and therefore, the community should be in charge of deciding on any linguistic disputes (Garvía, 2015).

Was this a linguistic research and not one of graphic design, the best result to aim for might have been to develop a new and properly neutral language, perhaps a modernisation of Esperanto. Since my expertise does not lie in linguistics however, I will not attempt to solve the slightly problematic Westernness of

Esperanto. Instead I will focus on Esperanto’s inner idea of welcomeness and inclusion, as I explore how the language might achieve it’s original purpose and position as the next lingua franca.

# Esperanto's value in society

Wilson refers to Esperanto as a utopian idea, describing it as an act of “forward dreaming” (Paul Wilson, 2019). Even though Zamenhof’s vision for the language was for it to be spoken by every living person, the language’s main function in today’s world remains one of community building amongst the people who chooses to learn it (Paul Wilson, 2019). For Esperanto to achieve it’s original position as a lingua franca however, every person in the world would need to learn it.

In order to understand more about how Esperanto could reach this position, I will attempt to highlight it’s prior successes and failures.

# Where did Esperanto succeed?



According to Garvía, the success of Esperanto comes down to its foundational ideas of peace, justice and mutual respect (Garvía, 2015). He suggests that like with the QWERTY keyboard and the VHS, Esperanto didn't become popular because of its technical benefits, but because of its organisational factors and ideology (Garvía, 2015). The inner idea of Esperanto was always what made people willing to learn. This becomes evident when looking at some of the groups who have previously been associated with Esperanto, including groups such as Catholics, Protestants, socialists, pacifists, vegetarians and excursionists (Garvía, 2015). According to Garvía, Esperantists with an ideological motivation were the ones who were most involved in the movement.

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Fig. 7: Amstrad 1987. Amstrad PCW 9512 Keyboard. [Keyboard]

# Why Esperanto is not the lingua franca today

As we have already learned, all lingua francas to date owe their success to the economic and political power of their speakers and states (Garvía, 2015). Since Esperanto is stateless, it has never had a government to fight for it (Garvía, 2015). Nor has it ever really been generally accepted by the public (Garvía, 2015).

According to Garvía, Esperantists “had to strive for the recognition of an outside and not very sympathetic world” (Garvía, 2015), and in many ways this quote demonstrates the dilemma of universal languages (and in fact, international agreement in general). The world is not black and white, and it’s peoples do not agree on everything. I’d like to believe that the majority of us would like to live in peace, but unfortunately, our different perspectives of the world prohibits us from doing so.

## We need to feel our language

In the very beginning of this project, I explored how a language could be felt, looking at how the Maori people in Australia could not *feel their language* in the city. Garvía suggests that there is a mysterious link between language and ethnicity, and that because of this, artificial languages can never truly succeed (Garvía, 2015). He further quotes the prior European Commissioner for Multilingualism, Leonard Orban; “Esperanto is lacking culture, and therefore not a real language” (Garvía, 2015).

I interpret this to mean that for Esperanto to become a “real language”, and a lingua franca, people will need a reason to connect with the

language – perhaps on a spiritual and rather intuitional level. They will need to feel as part of an Esperanto culture, and in effect *feel* the language through a link to their surroundings. Therefore, in order to make Esperanto the lingua franca, we will first have to build and expand upon an Esperanto culture, and by effect make the act of connecting with and speaking the language an act of purpose and identification.

# Esperanto culture making

Garvía argues that there are two ways a language can become a lingua franca: 1: “An international body can adopt it formally” (Garvía, 2015), and 2; “The strength and extension of it’s community makes it so”.

One could of course attempt to target decision makers in international organisations and unions, hoping to persuade them to adopt Esperanto as an official language. However, when discussing the idea of *feeling* a language and building it’s culture, I would claim that Garvía’s second option would be

a more natural strategy to adopt. When attempting to develop a culture, we are after all hoping to develop a community in which this culture is shared – meaning that strengthening and extending the Esperanto community would be the very aim of such an intent.

Moving forward I will go on to argue for the final rational of my project, which is rooted in the idea of making Esperanto culture through a global art making platform.

# How does one build a culture?

Culture is manifested and developed through many applications. It's in the music we listen to, the languages we speak, our religions and beliefs, social norms and behaviours, and the art we make and experience (Pappas and McKelvie, 2021). Therefore, in a way, Esperanto culture already exists through its verbal nature and its ideology, but also through social behaviours such as gatherings at international Esperanto conventions.

Although Esperanto music, art and literature also already exists to some extent, the works I have been able to find have been works of translation, rather than works meant to convey Esperanto's inner idea. Perhaps if we were to fill this gap, we could also expand on the Esperanto culture that already exists today?

Another way of defining culture is "the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group" (Pappas and McKelvie, 2021). In order to build and expand on Esperanto culture, we might therefore begin by

building a community, which grows out from a particular social pattern, rooted in the inner idea of Esperanto.

## Which community?

If Esperanto is to become the next lingua franca, it will eventually have to be adopted by *everyone*. However, before reaching this stage, it would be beneficial to focus on early adopters – those who resonate with the inner idea of Esperanto already, and who are likely to want to learn a new language in purpose of the better good.

As we already know, Esperanto has been popular amongst social groups such as catholics, protestants, socialists, pacifists, vegetarians and excursionists (Garvía, 2015). What these groups have in common is their ideological (and perhaps at times slightly activist) behavioural patterns – the want to

change the world for the better.

Based on these wants and behaviours, I have attempted to develop three personas, meant to illustrate potential early adopters of Esperanto today, whom would make up the initial community of an Esperanto culture building initiative.

### **The activist**

The activist works part time in a bar and spends most of her spare time engaging with societal issues such as equal rights and the immigration crisis. She likes to go out to (slightly underground) bars and isn't worried about breaking the rules for a "good cause".

*The activist wants to:*

- Make a difference in the world
- Be heard by politicians, friends and family
- Influence those with other opinions than herself

**The high school pupil**

The high school pupil is in the Media and Communications programme and spends her time doing voluntary political work, photographing and hanging out with her misfit, but very cool friends. After school she goes to small hang outs in the park. In the weekends she likes to visit museums such as Astrup Fearnley and Kunstnerens hus (OSL), which she strongly identifies with and proudly documents on social media.

*The high school pupil wants to:*

- Find herself
- Be part of something bigger than herself
- Be trendy, but not necessarily popular

**The humanities student**

The humanities student enjoys philosophical reflection and believe in the importance of seeing all sides of a story. She studies linguistics and is part of multiple student societies where she spends the majority of her time. Structure is important to her, but she needs to live in a space of flexibility where she can be spontaneous.

*The humanities student wants to:*

- Be part of and contribute to a community
- Find and discuss new perspectives
- Continuously develop as a person (she tends to jump in and out of new interests)

*Further information about the developed personas can be found on my blog.*

## Which social pattern?

Now that we know who to target, we will have to identify a shared social pattern, which will be used to grow the group identity, or in other words “make the culture”.

If culture is manifested through applications such as music, language and art, one might begin to build culture by making examples of Esperanto culture using these applications. As mentioned, there seems to be a gap in Esperanto art making and literature. Also, the act of writing and the act of art making both have a sense of intuition and play to them,

meaning anyone could develop these types of works without beholding any particular set of skills.

Thus, writing and art making could act as the social pattern for an Esperanto culture making initiative, by building a community which members are asked to illustrate and comment on Esperanto’s inner idea.

# ESP.Culturo: A culture making platform for all

The final result of my research will be an Esperanto culture making initiative, meant to encourage users from around the globe to take part in digital Esperanto art and literature making. The aim for this initiative will be to build awareness of Esperanto as a language, but also to build an inclusive and welcoming global community which is open to all.

## Open to all – what does it mean?

As already established, the culture making initiative will be targeted towards the early adopters, rather than just *everyone*. The established personas' wants and needs will therefore influence the final design development. Thus, when I say that the platform should be open to *all* I do not mean that it should be targeted towards *everyone*, but rather that it should be as *inclusive* as possible.

This means that the final application will need to be equally as available and equally as usable for the entirety of the target audience, despite factors such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and prior language knowledge. Although the aim behind the initiative is to spread awareness of Esperanto, the application in itself will need to be available in all languages, in order to avoid linguistic hegemony and Western benefit (since Esperanto is made up of Western language influences, using solely Esperanto would most likely result in a Western benefit). The aim of

the culture making initiative might therefore be seen as the spreading of Esperanto's inner idea, rather than of the verbal language alone.

It's also simply more practical to let users choose a language they know, since the majority of the target audience will not know Esperanto, seeing that the aim behind the initiative is to build awareness and expand on the Esperanto community.

## Works about Esperanto's inner idea

Rather than being about the verbal aspect of Esperanto, the culture making initiative will encourage the making of art and literature rooted in Esperanto ideology. The final application will ask users to create works with themes such as *peace*, *inclusivity*, *language* and *our societies*. This way, users will not be expected to agree with other members of the community, but rather to share a piece of themselves as people, offering a personal perspective that relates to Esperanto as a whole.



Fig. 8: Reigstad 2022. *ESP.Culturo*:  
User generated outcome

## Desired result: Digital activism for the common good

The final Esperanto culture making initiative, *ESP.Culturo*, will take place on a digital website as well as in a semi-constructed AR space. Here, users will be able to write texts or draw digital paintings, which will be published in AR exhibition rooms.

By presenting the Esperanto culture results in an AR gallery, the “made culture” will be equally as available to everyone around the globe. And by merging users’ personal spaces with a constructed Esperanto one, the private and shared blends, resulting in people “meeting halfway” (Paul Wilson, 2019) as intended by Zamenhof. Here, users will hopefully find a common ground as they experience a shared culture for all.

Users will also be able to share their made works on social media, for example by exporting the art works as Instagram posts or Instagram filters. This way, users will



Fig. 9: Reigstad 2022. *ESP.Culturo*:  
In progress prototype



share digital activism posters, fighting for their personal opinions and the common good, whilst also building awareness around Esperanto as a language and digital community.

## How does ESP.Culturo cater for the needs of its audience?

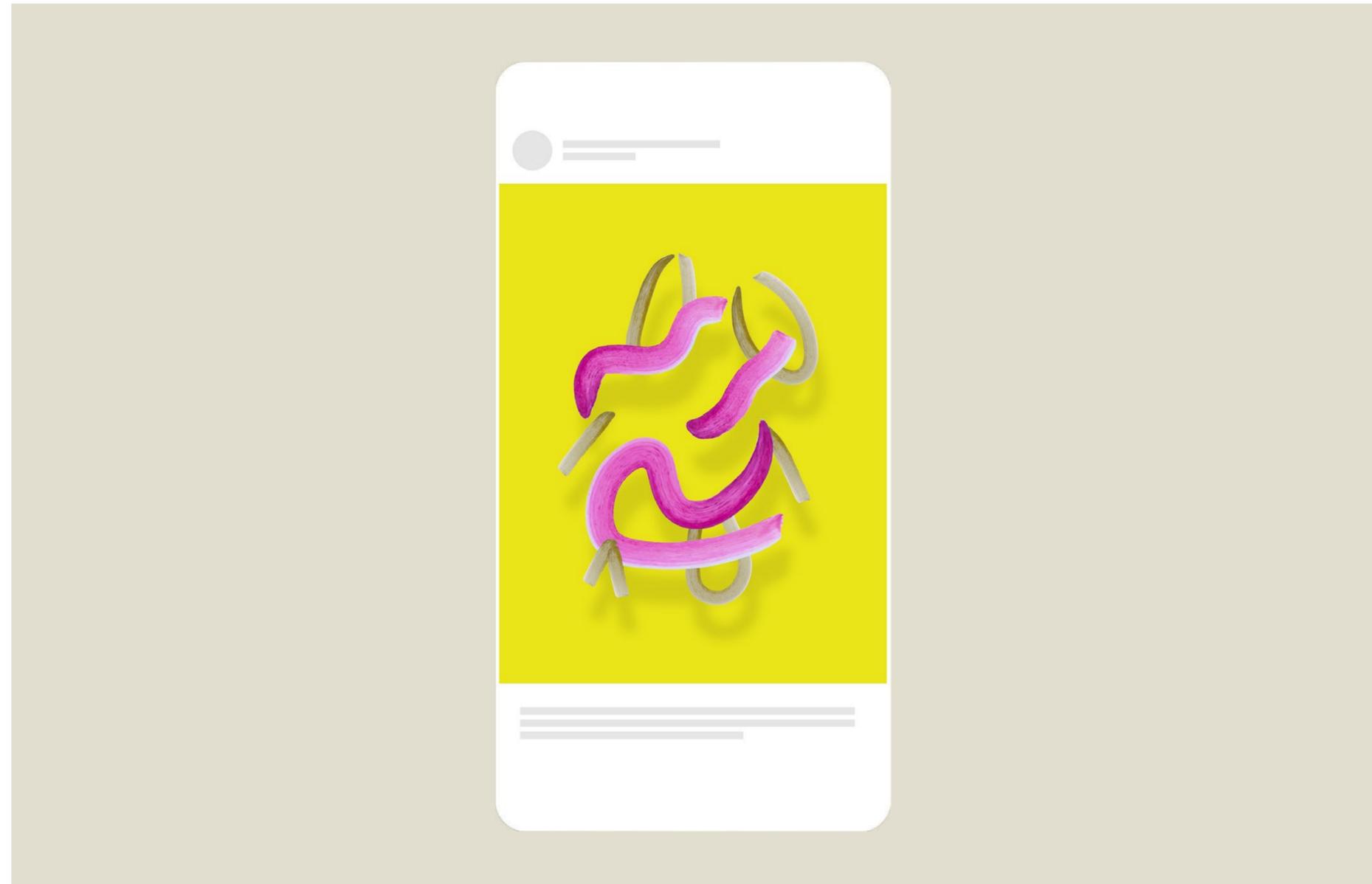
The ESP.Culturo initiative lets **The activist** feel like she is making a difference in the world by giving her a chance to fight for inclusivity and peace. Posting her works on social media gives her a chance to be heard by politicians, friends and family, and lets her try to influence those in her following who have other opinions than herself.

←  
Fig. 10: Reigstad 2022. AR experiment

**The high school pupil** gets to identify with something bigger than herself – particularly when exploring other users' works in the AR gallery. The making aspect of the initiative resonates with her creativity and the option of documenting works on social media works well with her prior habit of documenting physical gallery visits on social media.

**The humanities student** gets to be part of and contribute to a community, letting her find and discuss new perspectives through the making tool and gallery.

→  
Fig. 11: Reigstad 2022. *Instagram post test*



Conclusion:

# Esperanto's true value: Fighting for common good

Although some members of the Esperanto community today might still hope that Esperanto will reach its utopian position as the next lingua franca, I personally struggle to see how all nations of today's world will be able to agree on one shared non-political language for all. Even if they did, would they be able to agree on major world conflicts such as wars and climate change, solely due to speaking

a shared non-beneficial language? In many ways, this research has been grounded in the idea of a utopia – presenting an ideological black and white solution to a nuanced and very human issue of societal disadvantage.

Yet, the initial foundation of this research was never really to make Esperanto the next lingua franca.

Rather, it was to investigate how constructed language can be used to increase inclusiveness in our societies. Even if Esperanto is not a viable solution to total world agreement, speaking the language and becoming part of an Esperanto culture can still become an act of taking a political stand. It can become a symbol of one's wish to meet other people openly and fairly, despite of their national, social and economical background.

I think there is reason to believe that Esperanto will always be representative of the common good. Speaking Esperanto represents the choice of fighting for all people, and as an Esperantist one almost automatically takes the diplomatic side in the equation of people vs. nations. It's a language

for the activist whom's wish is to change the world, and in a similar manner, the intention of ESP.Culturo is the very same: to let people take a stance for equality and inclusion for all.

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# List of figures

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Figure 2. Przemek BIZON. 2022. *Moreless.type ARP*. It's Nice That [online]. Available at: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/przemek-bizon-graphic-design-art-180222>

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Figure 8: Ingrid REIGSTAD. 2022. *ESP.Culturo: User generated outcome*. Private collection: Ingrid Reigstad.

Figure 9: Ingrid REIGSTAD. 2022. *ESP.Culturo: In progress prototype*. Private collection: Ingrid Reigstad.

Figure 10: Ingrid REIGSTAD. 2022. *AR experiment*. Private collection: Ingrid Reigstad.

Figure 11: Ingrid REIGSTAD. 2022. *Instagram post test*. Private collection: Ingrid Reigstad.