

HOW ESPERANTO  
CHANGED MY LIFE





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CHANGED  
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*Arlyn Kerr*

This is my first “zine”. I published it during a zine workshop conducted by Elaine Harger at Mount Si High School, in Snoqualmie, WA. Thanks, Elaine! Also thanks to my husband Les, who attended the class with me and helped with ideas and production details.

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## What is Esperanto?

If you just picked this zine up, you might be wondering, “What the heck is Esperanto?” Well, it’s a language. But not a national centuries-old language like Swedish or Swahili. Esperanto is an invented language, created in 1887 by a man in Poland named L.L. Zamenhof.

How could a language change my life? Read on.

## Why Esperanto is different from other languages

Esperanto is different from national languages in two main ways:

- 1) It’s far easier to learn
- 2) It’s “neutral”—that is, it doesn’t belong to any particular country or ethnic group



*Our license plate says "hello".  
It's pronounced sa-loo-tone.*



## Why is Esperanto easier to learn?

Imagine if you could simplify English without eliminating any subtleties of meaning. You might make the spelling phonetic. You might take away all the “exceptions to the rule” like *mice* instead of *mouses* and *bought* instead of *buyed*.

If it were German you were simplifying, you would probably get rid of gender, whereby *spoon* is masculine, *fork* is feminine, and *knife* is neuter. If it were Russian, you’d probably take out the various cases: nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, etc. You’d take out confusions like words with double meanings (*bark* of a dog, *bark* of a tree).

Babies learn the rules of their native language fine (although even school-age children don’t have all the grammar, saying things like “me and Nancy want that” instead of “Nancy and I”), but it’s difficult for adults learning the language.

Kio estas tio?  
Tio estas kato.  
Ĉu tio estas hundo?  
Jes, tio estas hundo.  
La kato estas oranĝa.  
La muso estas nigra.  
La hundo estas granda.  
La kato estas malgranda.  
La malgranda muso estas bruna.  
Ĉu la juna kato estas granda?  
Ne, la juna kato estas malgranda.  
La maljuna nigra kato estas granda.

What is that?  
That’s a cat.  
Is that a dog?  
Yes, that’s a dog.  
The cat is orange.  
The mouse is black.  
The dog is big.  
The cat is small.  
The small mouse is brown.  
Is the young cat big?  
No, the young cat is small.  
The old black cat is big.

Well, Zamenhof looked at many languages, and could see which features are necessary and which are just unneeded baggage. He created Esperanto to be completely regular (no exceptions to rules), completely phonetic (no such thing as a spelling bee!), with simple verb conjugations—in general, he removed a lot of the difficulties.

That's why you can learn Esperanto in a fourth of the time needed for other second languages. I've seen this figure, and I believe it, based on my own experience. I studied French for four years in high school, Russian for four years in high school and one in college—yet, after eight months of Esperanto classes one evening a week, I was much more fluent than I'd ever been in French or Russian. Boy, did it feel good to be able to read a non-English magazine or novel, and talk easily with somebody from another country.

Zamenhof spent years perfecting the language (tweaking the grammar, developing vocabulary, translating poems and other works to see what the problems were), and it shows in the final product. I love the fact that he didn't try to get any profit from it, or even to retain "ownership"; he just gave it to the world to develop it from there. Nowadays a project like this would be assigned to a huge international committee, and the result would be a mess of compromises.

ACTUALLY, THE HISTORY OF  
INVENTED LANGUAGES IS  
FASCINATING. WHEN YOU SEE  
HOW WACKY SOME OF THEM ARE,  
YOU REALLY APPRECIATE THE  
BRILLIANCE OF ZAMENHOF!

## **What's the advantage of a language being neutral? And isn't English already the universal language?**

Many people say that English is already the universal language, because lots of foreigners have studied it, and the U.S. is a powerful force in the world. But if you go to other countries and speak with people, you often find that, for all those years of study, they don't speak English very well. If you're discussing philosophy, or science, or religion, or politics, they're having to consult a dictionary or use gestures, or stumble for words, they're often mutilating the pronunciation and grammar—in short, it's not the same conversation you'd have with a native English speaker. For ten years my husband Les and I worked with foreign families who came to Seattle for medical treatment, and often only one member in a family of five could speak even broken English. (Fortunately, our success with Esperanto made us fearless about quickly learning everyday Greek, German, Italian, Spanish, etc.)

People often have to learn a second language because of conquest, either political or economic. Think of native American children being taken from their tribes and sent to schools where they were punished for speaking their native tongues. Or consider the French people in Quebec having to learn English because the better jobs require it. They resent that second language. (And the French Canadians even wanted to secede from Canada because of it.) It's truly amazing that about two million people currently speak Esperanto, without being forced to learn it, and with no economic advantage.





Two Esperanto speakers are on equal footing. It's neither person's first language (except for a group I'll mention later), and even if one is the better Esperanto speaker, that better speaker is more tolerant (and knows which kinds of grammar to avoid) because he or she remembers what it was like to be at a more basic level.

Here's a question I always pose to those who think the world language problem is already solved. Why does the United Nations spend a quarter of its budget on translation of speeches and documents among the six official languages? Because those speakers of other languages are unwilling to have only one national language (English) be the UN's language. People are proud of their native tongues, and feel humiliated to be forced to use somebody else's, even if they're fairly fluent.

Here's another question: why are ballots in U.S. elections written in other languages in various places? Like, Chinese in Seattle, and Spanish in California. These are U.S. citizens we're talking about—they had to live here for at least five years before becoming citizens—but they can't speak English well enough to cast a vote in English? How does that fit in with English being or becoming the universal language, when our own citizens can't master it?

If everybody used Esperanto as their second language, the instructions on your new iron wouldn't have to be in ten languages, only in one: Esperanto. Announcements at Sea-Tac Airport wouldn't have to be in English and Japanese, only in Esperanto. When you travel to Slovakia and want to use a pay telephone, you wouldn't need to hail a passerby to explain the directions, because they'd be written in Esperanto. Life would be so much simpler in our global world!

## Esperanto is Fun!

Esperanto immediately appealed to me, because I'm a mathematician and like things to be logical. When I learned French and Russian, I enjoyed the experience, but often got frustrated. Why do they need to do that? That's a crazy rule! Why is there a different past tense in a novel than in ordinary talking? Why are there so many exceptions? I never felt that way with Esperanto. I loved how well-thought-out the rules are. For example, all nouns end in "o", all adjectives end in "a", most adverbs end in "e". So, if you're reading along and see a word you don't know, you at least have a clue: it's an adjective, or a past-tense verb, or whatever. There's a systematic table to relate words like *how*, *why*, *because*, *there*, *never*, *anybody*, etc.

After you learn the basic rules, comes the bonus: Esperanto is a great language for being creative. There are a few dozen short prefixes and suffixes that change the meaning of a root. Here's an example. The suffix "il" means "tool". So *fosi* is "to dig", and *fosilo* is a shovel. *Foti* is "to photograph" and *fotilo* is a camera. *Tranchi* is "to cut with a blade" and *tranchilo* is "knife".

Do you see how I just got extra words (not at all similar in English) out of each root by using the "tool" suffix? A useful prefix is "mal" which makes the opposite out of anything. So if you know "good", then you also know "bad". If you know "tall", then you know "short". Out of the root word for "eat", you use prefixes and suffixes to get the words for: meal, breakfast, lunch, dinner, silverware, feast, snack, dining room, glutton, etc.



OK, this makes vocabulary-building easier, but what does that have to do with creativity? Well, you can create new words using the prefixes and suffixes and combining root words. You can not only “verbize” any noun, you can make any part of speech into another part (adjective out of what’s usually a verb, etc.) You can be the first person in the world to ever utter a certain word, and yet a listener would know exactly what you mean.

And you’re able to get so many subtleties, nuances, of meaning from a smaller vocabulary. So many new Esperantists write poetry in the language, that a standard joke goes like this:

First person: When did you learn Esperanto?

Second person: I’ve been studying it for two months.

First person: Oh, may I see your poems?

I often find myself thinking in Esperanto, even occasionally dreaming in Esperanto. Sometimes I know a word in Esperanto, but can’t come up with the equivalent English word!



## Esperanto is a great way to meet foreigners on an intimate level

Most people who travel the world stay at hotels where all the staff speak English. Convenient, but not a good way to meet the natives. Even staying in smaller *pensions* or such doesn't give a chance to really get to know what life is like for the locals. But Esperantists travel the world staying with other Esperantists, and get to see what home life and local life are like.

Soon after starting to learn Esperanto, Les and I each got ourselves some penpals scattered around the world: Brazil, Tanzania, Russia, Italy, etc. (When I'd learned French I had a French penpal, likewise for Russian, but this was thrilling to be corresponding with people in so many countries.) All of them soon invited us to visit. Les visited his penpal in East Germany three times, staying with her family and meeting her Esperanto friends, and had a completely different experience than he would have otherwise; actually, without Esperanto, he'd have never had the chance to even enter East Germany at that time. When he was on business in Moscow, he looked up the local Esperanto group, and one of them spent an entire day taking him around the city. During college, my daughter studied mathematics in Budapest. Most students lived in a dorm with the other U.S. students, but our daughter found herself an Esperanto-speaking family to live with; she saw what life was like there with a youngster and a teenager, and went with them to their local haunts, etc.



My penpal in Tanzania

Uzi adreso ĉi tie (Nova) ,

Miss Mosti Daudi Mchete.

% Joseph Kishiwa

Romarii, katholiciki, Box 42

Bunda, 1990-09-026

Mia amo Kerr!

Mi tre dankas vin pro via leteron. Mi esperas ke vi kaj via familio tute bone! kaj mi estas Malbone ne Malsana krom Malgranda patro mortis 1990-00 DIA. Aliaj en mia hejme estas Sanega!

Ankaŭ mi

amo mia bildo kaj mia vestoj malligi kaj f

konvolu mi petas sendi al

vi demandis al mi

homoj knaboj sta

estas mia amikino

mi. En la aliaj bi

staris, Maldekstro

Via amiko ĉiujn es

stro estas Malgranda patro en la centro mia patrino

Nomiĝas MARIA kaj mia fratino nomiĝas Pily.

kaj mi kuŝas sube. Mia kara nun mi sidas

kaj ripari Man-laboro. Mi atendas Sezone de



*Houcein et Ghislaine Bayed*

*Myriam et Samy*



Trélon, la 5 an de Februaro,

kara amikino,

Miraklo!! Mi ne scias kial, sed momente, mi ne havas grandan amason da respondontaj leteroj. Mi decidis provi ne tro amasigi ilin. Kiom da tempo, tiu decido funkcias???? Mi tute ne scias.

Do, dankon pro via letero. Mi estas tre feliĉa legi ke ĵuli kaj Ben travivas aman tempon. kompreneble, mi deziras al ili longan kaj feliĉan vivon, kun amo ĉe la koro. Mi estas ĉiam surprizita, kiel tre facile, vi veturas multajn kilometrojn. Kiel mi diris al mia edzo: vi veturas kilometrojn, kiel ni, piedas ĝis la fino de nia ĝardeno. Grandaj gratuloj pro tiu granda kvalito. Ankaŭ gratulojn al ĵuli kaj David, pro siaj ĵus diplomoj.

Ankaŭ, mi vidas, ke vi estas sportuloj. ĉi-tie, Hocéine tute ne ŝatas sporti...kaj mi, pro miaj spiraj problemoj povas nur marŝi tra la kamparo. sed, tio, mi faras preskaŭ ĉiutage, escepte, se tro pluvas.

Ĉirkau novjaro, ni havis sufiĉe grandan froston (-10°, -15°). La akvo glaciigis en la akvo-kanalaro. Ni devis varmigi ilin per elektra hejtigilo por retrovi varman akvon ĉe la kranoj. Tamen, feliĉe, hejtado bone funkciis. Mi scias kiel malagrabla estas, kiam estas elektra-pano. Feliĉe, tia pano ĝenerale daŭras, nur kelkaj horoj maksimume. Mi esperas, ke via elektra pano ne tro daŭris.

mi opinias, ke por vi, la nuna situacio en eksjugoslavio kortuŝas vin, ankoraŭ pli ol ni. Mi multe esperas, ke finfine saĝeco alvenos en tiu parto de la mondo.

Samy bone spiras post sia operacio. Mia mano ne plu doloras, post mia operacio. Mi havas ankoraŭ problemojn por bone uzi ĝin, sed mi scias ke nur necesas pacienco. Mia patro denove enhospitaliĝis pro hemiplegio. Dank'al Dio,

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There's a great annual booklet that lists Esperantists who are willing to host other Esperantists; each host gives rules like "no smokers" or "maximum 4 days". I personally know two Esperantists who used the book extensively when they were in their early twenties; each spent about a year traveling the world "on the cheap" by staying with Esperantists. Our family has used that book when visiting other countries, but, more often, we've hosted travelers ourselves. It's been such fun to have visiting Chinese, Italian, Argentinean, etc., people in our home for a few days.

So there's an advantage to the fact that not a huge number of people speak Esperanto: namely, Esperantists are glad to host other Esperantists. If everybody in the world spoke Esperanto, that's an advantage I would miss.

For a few years we subscribed to one of the international Esperanto magazines, and it was eye-opening to read the news as told by people of many countries. What the U.S. newspapers were saying about an incident, often wasn't at all the way it was seen by a writer from Ethiopia or Thailand. Les even contributed a few articles of international interest—it was exciting to know his words were being read by people in 80 countries!



21.01.98. Pinsk.

Saluton, kara Ailyn!  
Mi kun granda ĝojo  
ricevis vian leteron  
kaj pro tio mi tre

dankas al vi. Mi certe volas korespondi  
kun vi.

Al mi estas tre interese scii pro via  
lando, urbo. Mia familio loĝas en  
Belarusio en patra patrio. Mia patro



## Esperanto makes the world seem smaller

A side effect of having penpals—visiting people in foreign countries, having them visit you, etc.—is that the world seems smaller. It's harder to bypass a political article about Nigeria if you know somebody in Nigeria. If you hear about an earthquake in Pakistan, you automatically wonder if it affected your friend there. Esperanto has made me less insular.



Part of my

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button collection



## Esperanto on the Internet

Nowadays we don't have many penpals, because the Internet has changed life. Now we're more likely to write e-mail messages to Esperantists we've met through the hundreds of topic-specific groups. For instance, Les and I are vegan, and I belong to a vegetarian Esperanto newsgroup; I read the messages there, sometimes send in my own questions or responses, sometimes write privately to one of the other members. It makes me feel really a part of the entire world, to learn what vegetarians are eating in Serbia, or how hard it is to find fresh tofu in South America.

My favorite newsgroup is made up of people using Esperanto with their children. The name is "Denask" which refers to "Esperantists from birth". A typical member might be a couple living in Poland. The wife is Swedish, the husband is Hungarian. They met at a youth Esperanto conference, and their common language is Esperanto. The child is hearing Swedish when alone with her mother, Hungarian when alone with her father, Esperanto when the family is together, and Polish in preschool and the local environment. And, at age 3, understands them all! I just think that's so cool for children to learn lots of languages while young.

If we were learning Esperanto now, we probably wouldn't go to weekly classes like we did. Since its beginnings, most people have learned from a book, with no teacher (how many languages would that work for?!), but now people are more likely to learn through courses on the Internet.

## Esperanto at conferences

This will be hard for many people to believe, but I actually hate to travel. I spent ten weeks in Europe during college, hitchhiking around ten countries, and that seemed to fulfill any need I had to see far-flung places. But, since learning Esperanto, I've also had a desire to attend one of the international conferences. They're held in a different country each year, and finally last year Les and I attended one in Japan. What a thrill it was to spend a week among 2,000 people from 60 countries—hearing talks on every kind of subject from bridge-building to east-west relations, watching plays, going sightseeing, participating in discussion groups, even learning some basic Japanese—all using Esperanto, with no need of translators! We've also recently been to a joint U.S.-Mexican conference in Tijuana, and a conference in Montreal for North and South America. A few years ago we organized a combined U.S./Canada conference, a stressful but fulfilling experience that I wouldn't have done for any other group I belong to.

We're too old, but there are also annual international conferences for the under-30 crowd, with lots of Esperanto rock music and such. Our daughter attended one of these while she was in college. The young people, especially in Europe, organize multi-day bike rides, hiking trips, and other more physical activities.



Families in Europe have their own conferences, where all the little kids get a chance to use Esperanto with other children from many countries. A recent posting on Denask was 10 pages long (!); in it a man from Siberia recounted how he, his pregnant wife, and 3-year-old son hitchhiked to a family conference in southern France—it was a fascinating story.

A side-effect of the conferences is that I've become a better public speaker. I've always been terrified of speaking before a group, even making a comment in a public meeting. But in Esperanto groups I started giving talks (about kayaking in the northwest, or ferrets as pets, etc.), knowing that my audience is friendly, and it's had a carryover effect in English settings.



*International conference in Yokohama*

## Esperanto literature and music

There are thousands of books in Esperanto, both translations from other languages—including the Bible, the Koran, and most of Shakespeare’s plays—and original works. I’ve enjoyed both. When I read *Pinocchio*, translated from Italian to Esperanto, I realized that I’d never read the original work before, and knew only the Walt Disney version. I’ve never read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in the original English, only in Esperanto. And some of the original works are superb. The poetry especially is very popular with many Esperantists, though I’m not especially fond of poetry in any language.

Likewise, there’s some great Esperanto music. I love listening to my dozen CDs of singing—some familiar tunes translated, but most often original works.



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Some of my 100+ children's books

## SUD-AŬSTRALIO

C F C G7

Sud- Aŭs- tra- li- o nask- is min His- u ho,

C G7 C

haŭl- u ho, Nos- tal- gi- o vok- as min Al Sud-Aŭs- tra-

G7 C F C G7

li- o. Refreno His- u ho, mar- ist- oj vi, His- u ho,

C F C

haŭl- u ho, His- u ho, kant- ad- as mi Al Sud-Aŭs- tra-

G7 C Fajfu

li- o.

Jen bona ŝip' kaj ŝipantar',  
 Hisu ho! Haŭlu ho!  
 Min konduki trans la mar'  
 Al Sud-Aŭstralio.

Laŭ ĵurpromes' la amatin',  
 Hisu ho! Haŭlu ho!  
 Ĉe l' haven' atendos min  
 En Sud-Aŭstralio.

Laŭ Kab' Korn' velveturos ni,  
 Hisu ho! Haŭlu ho!  
 Preĝu por la zorg' de Di'  
 Al Sud-Aŭstralio.





## Culture

Some people claim that any created language can't be "real" because it has no associated culture. What a bogus argument! First off, if a language's main task is to allow communication, then who cares about the culture? Secondly, and ironically, Esperanto *does* have a culture. There may not be national dances or a national cuisine, but it has a shared original literature, music, videos, in-jokes, slang, even a flag and anthem. It has 121 years of history, with both heroes and traitors. Mostly it's a culture of peace and friendship. If it becomes everybody's second language in my lifetime (very doubtful), I'll be quite disappointed, because then drug-dealers and murderers will also be using it, and that "culture" will be ruined.

### Trivia Tidbit

The most famous film done in Esperanto is *Incubus*. This sci-fi movie stars William Shatner, before he became Captain Kirk. Esperantists always cringe when they watch it, because all the accents (especially Shatner's) are so terrible.

## Word derivation

The vocabulary of Esperanto is based mostly on Latin (the same as French, Italian, and Spanish), with some words also coming from Russian, German, and English. Since word derivation has always fascinated me, this makes Esperanto especially interesting. I love seeing the connections between Esperanto words and English words. For instance, in Esperanto “knee” is *genuo*, which struck me as close to the English word “genuflect”; when I looked in an English dictionary I could see that I was correct— “genuflect” does come from the similar Latin word for “knee”. While we’re talking about bendy anatomical parts, “elbow” is *kubuto*, and—sure enough— “cubit” is the English word for a measurement that is about the length from fingertip to the elbow. It turns out that Esperanto is as good as Latin for English vocabulary development—wish I’d known Esperanto in high school before taking the SAT’s!

### Some English words that are easier if you know Esperanto:

*fumigate*

*nebulizer*

*insular*

*veracity*

*fulminate*

*pugnacious*

*amicable*

*mordant*

*culpable*

*vitreous*

*fenestrated*

*horology*

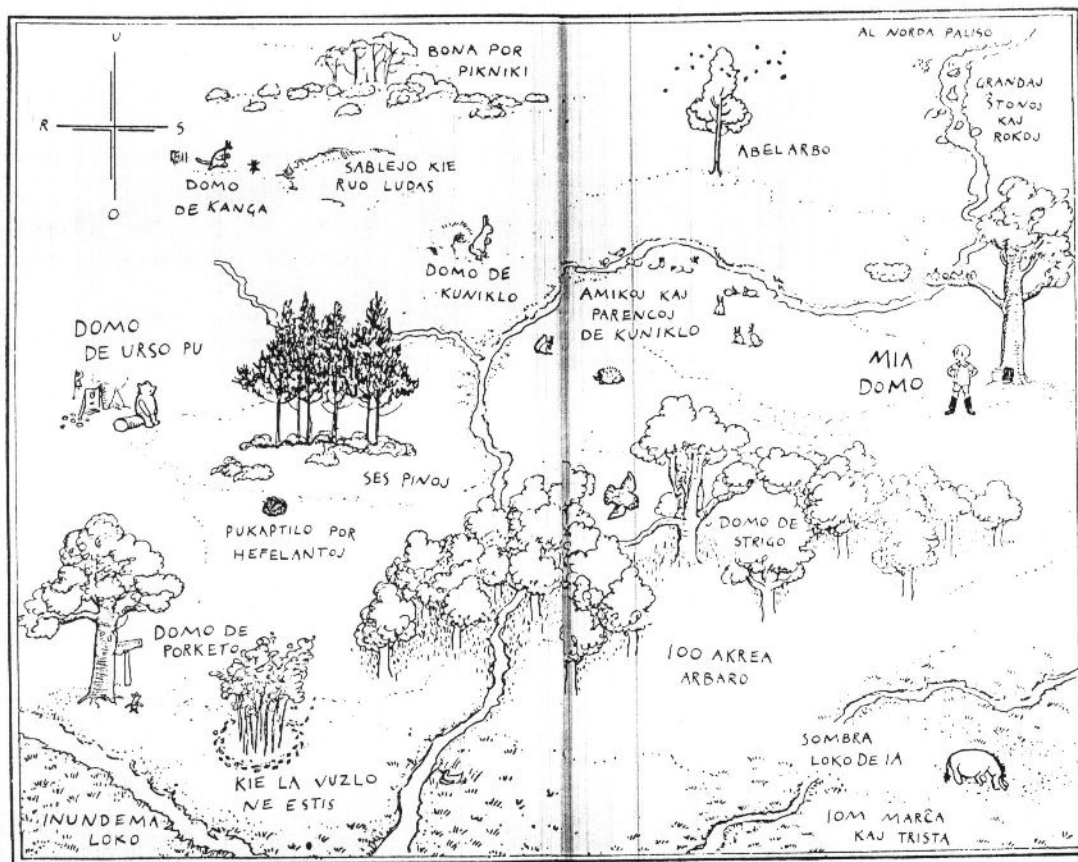
The Latin roots also make Esperanto a great springboard to the other Romance languages. In fact, a study in Sweden had one class learn French for two years, while the other learned Esperanto the first year, then French the second year. After two years, the Esperanto group spoke French better than the all-French group!

Esperanto is a useful first language not only for Romance languages, but for any other foreign language. That’s because learning one new foreign language helps the brain learn others, and, with Esperanto being four times easier to learn, the learner feels confident that he or she can master a new language.



## Esperanto is a good “secret” language

Most languages spread by military conquest, or because they are economically advantageous to learn. So it's amazing that several million people speak Esperanto just because they want to speak to peoples of other countries on an equal footing. While the world gets around to being sensible and adopting Esperanto as everybody's second language, it's great as a “secret” language among family or friends. For instance, I can talk on a cell phone to Les in an intimate way, with no fear of eavesdropping passersby.



## Local Groups

Although it's great to meet and correspond with people of other countries, the Esperantists I see most often are actually Americans: my local Seattle group, people from the northwest region who meet annually, and people from across the U.S. who meet annually. I discovered at the start how nice Esperantists are; our initial teacher was a retired UW psychology prof, one of the finest people Les and I have ever met.

Esperantists are generally quite interesting, often having diverse hobbies and jobs. For example, one man in our local group left the region several years ago to teach in Saudi Arabia for three years, and is now in Pakistan for three years. Some members of our local group were born abroad (Romania, Uzbekistan, Iran, etc.); the funny thing is that, even after being in the U.S. for many years, the English of some of them is so accented that I usually understand them more easily when they speak Esperanto.



*A meeting of Pacific Northwest Esperantists*

## Traits of Esperantists

My personality inclination (maybe like most people) is to choose friends who are very much like myself. But, because of Esperanto, I have a group of people who are from different backgrounds, with different lifestyles, etc. Here are the common traits of Esperantists as I see them:

- 1) They're a bit "different", which in my mind is admirable. You have to be somewhat weird to take up Esperanto instead of learning French or Japanese.
- 2) They're more optimistic than the general populace; you have to be an optimist to believe in the hoped-for outcome—namely that at some point Esperanto will truly become everybody's second language.
- 3) They think more long-range than most. Besides enjoying Esperanto for what it gives them, they want to keep the language alive until the rest of the world comes to its senses and adopts it as the universal second language. They realize that might be 100 years from now, but it doesn't faze them.
- 4) Since Esperanto is often the butt of joking by those who don't understand it ("Why don't you learn a REAL language?"), an Esperantist must be tolerant of fools.
- 5) Actually they're more tolerant of *everybody*. They see people as people, not categorizing them by religion, race, gender preference, political ideas, etc. They genuinely want to communicate with all kinds of people from all kinds of places.
- 6) Some are extremely intelligent. Some speak not only Esperanto, but five or more other languages, and know a lot about linguistics in general. Many are scientific types, attracted to the logic of Esperanto as I am. There's even an Esperanto subgroup in Mensa, the organization for geniuses.

## Summary

So here's how Esperanto has enriched my life:

- 1) Made me feel good about myself that I could master a foreign language
- 2) Gave me a fascinating hobby
- 3) Helped my English vocabulary
- 4) Gave me interesting literature and music
- 5) Gave me a secret language to use with several relatives
- 6) Gave me a global perspective, made me less insular
- 7) Gave me the incentive to travel, overcoming my stay-at-home disposition
- 8) Improved my public speaking and organizational skills
- 9) Most of all, introduced me to many interesting people, both from the U.S. and from other countries

## I LOVE ESPERANTO!!

*P.S. if you're intrigued, Google on Esperanto; of the 50 million hits, the top ten will give you plenty of information to get you going.*



I have lots of  
Esperanto T-shirts



