

Constructed language and linguistic theory

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0. Introduction

'Natural language' is arguably the most central concept within linguistic theory — it defines its object of study —, but it is hardly ever discussed outside the first pages of introductory textbooks. It is usually taken for granted that everybody knows what the label means, and that it can be applied to American English, Yiddish and Eastern Javanese, but not to tonal music, the programming language Prolog, or the languages of the Elves in the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Many interlinguists — those scholars concerned with the study of consciously planned languages meant for international communication — follow this line of reasoning to some extent, if they defend the validity of their interest in Esperanto (cf. Schubert 1989, Tonkin and Fettes 1996 for fairly recent overviews). They argue that Esperanto is markedly different from other planned languages, because it has been used in a much wider range of communicative situations, because it has become associated with a separate 'Esperantist culture', or because it is learnt by children as one of their native languages. For this reason, Esperanto would have started to differ from its competitors: it would be the only 'language project' that has succeeded in becoming a 'real (natural) language'.

This line of argumentation is examined in this article. I study the relevance of some planned or constructed languages other than Esperanto, viz. Interlingua, Ido, Europanto and Spocanian. These have been made up in slightly different ways, all serve different goals and different philosophies have guided the construction of their respective grammars. Neither of them has any real native speakers, as far as I am able to tell.

In my view it is still worthwhile to consider projects such as these, because they can be seen as extreme cases. It is a standard practice in at least some branches of science to look at the behaviour of the object of study in some extreme circumstances: how does a plant grow in a spacecraft in which it does not experience gravity? What is the behaviour of chemical elements if we put them under conditions of extreme heat? If we consider language to be a natural object of some sort, it is interesting to see what remains of this 'naturalness' after extreme forms of conscious human intervention, such as happen in the construction of a language. Is it possible to really construct a new human language? To what extent is such a language different from other ones?

As already indicated above, interlinguists often draw a distinction between 'language projects', which have been proposed (e.g. for which somebody wrote a prescriptive grammar and a vocabulary) but which never functioned as a means of communication inside a community, and 'real languages' on the other hand.

In this article, I will be concerned mainly with a different dimension, and argue for a distinction that is orthogonal to the traditional one. I claim

that we should differentiate between ‘actual languages’, ‘possible languages’ and ‘impossible languages’. This terminology derives from the study of phonology and morphology, where one can distinguish between ‘actual’, ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ words of a language. The paradigm case of this, due to Halle (1962) are the strings *brick*, *blick* and *bnick*. Of these three, *brick* obviously is an actual word of English, with a reasonably well-defined meaning attached to it, and known by most speakers of the language. *Blick* cannot be found in an English dictionary, but it still is a *possible word* of English: it conforms to the phonological laws of the language, and one could imagine that somebody would start using this word with a special meaning one day; other speakers of English would have no problem accepting it. In fact, most English speakers would probably have to check with a dictionary in order to be sure that *blick* is not an actual word of their language, which just happens to have a very specialized meaning they did not know before. This is not true for **bnick*, however, or, more extremely, for **bdick*, **bnck* or **bdrckni*, which do not even sound as English words. Nobody would be led to think that *bdrckni* was an actual word of English he just happened to never have heard before. These forms are therefore *impossible words*.

Everybody can invent new possible or impossible words; only the possible words stand a chance to become actual words, but it depends on many external factors, such as fashion, the need for a new word within a community, and coincidence, whether a given possible word will ever grow into an actual word. The ideal linguistic theory can predict whether a given string is a possible or impossible word; but it probably cannot predict whether it will ever grow into an actual word, because this is dependent on too many factors that are not in our grasp.

I propose to extend this threefold distinction to the realm of languages, and speak about actual, possible and impossible languages. People can construct a language, which will be either possible or impossible. Only the possible languages have the potential to grow into an actual language, but if some project never grew into an actual language (i.e. a language that is used by some community in the way other languages are used in other communities), this does not mean that it is an impossible language. The fact that Esperanto now functions in a limited way as a language, proves that it always was a *possible* language; the fact that Leibniz’ project *Lingua Universalis* never functioned as such does not in itself prove that this ever was an impossible language (even though there may be other reasons to think it was).

It is one of the tasks of linguistic theory to characterize the notion ‘possible natural language’; studying extreme, constructed, cases is one way of approaching that topic. This is what I will set out to do. I will concentrate on grammatical theory, although some attention will be paid to sociolinguistics and other branches of linguistic theorizing as well. Before I will delve into the details of the four language systems in the sections 2 (on Interlingua and Ido) and 3 (on Europanto and Spocanian), the next section first gives some general background information on the role of the notion ‘linguistic naturalness’ in linguistics and in interlinguistics.

1. The place of interlinguistics within linguistics

Many linguists prefer to see themselves as scientists, working on empirical problems in the natural world. The precise form of the natural object they are studying varies among practitioners of the field. In historical linguistics

for instance, people have sometimes talked about languages as if they themselves were natural, living beings, that could produce offspring -- French and Italian are 'daughters' of Latin -- and that could die, and hence become 'dead' rather than 'living' languages. Psycholinguists (Levelt 1989), and to a certain extent generative grammarians (Chomsky 1988), see the language capacities of the individual human being, preferably so-called 'native speakers', as their main object of study. Sociolinguists concern themselves with the linguistic behaviour of groups of human beings; for them language is an emergent property of a social group, rather than of an individual (Labov 1994).

It seems to me that these various branches of linguistics have in common that the issue of the human free will is left out of consideration. There certainly is a sound methodological reason behind this, since so little is certain here. The free will is a topic that is outside the realm of human understanding almost by definition. (If we would understand it, we could predict its behaviour and it would no longer be free; therefore, either the free will is an illusion, or it cannot be explained. Either way, it can hardly be part of explorations by science.) Furthermore, if we need to acknowledge a free will, we need to say as well that human behaviour is unpredictable to a certain extent, and this in turn would leave the study of this behaviour outside of scientific inquiry, where testing predictions counts as the most important means to assess the value of a given theory. It thus may seem safer to abstract away from the free will, either by studying the behaviour of larger groups of people (or larger corpora of text) in which the free will is averaged out as it were, or to concentrate on the capacities of human beings rather than on the way in which they use these capacities in a given situation.

In general terms, this may be the reason why so many linguists find it hard to accept interlinguistics, the study of so-called 'planned' languages, as a proper field of inquiry. Planning, inventing or constructing a language such as Ido (Beaufront 1919) or Glosa (Ashby and Clark 1984) — both proposed in the twentieth century as alternatives to Esperanto — is an act of free will, if ever there was one. Everything imaginable is possible if one wants to invent a language. The act of language planning therefore cannot be studied in the usual scientific way.

Language planning poses a particularly hard methodological problem for sciences concerned with the grammatical structure of language, since planning of an international language usually targets precisely the grammar next to the lexicon. No matter whether a grammarian is interested in Minimalism (Chomsky 1995), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (Pollard and Sag 1994), Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 1993), or some other form of modern grammatical theory, one of his goals usually is to characterize the notion 'possible grammar', and, derived from this, the notion 'possible language'. One of the most common types of predictions of grammatical theory has the shape: 'No language can exist with property P'.¹ Yet if this prediction is sufficiently precise and we allow ourselves to look at constructed languages, we are faced with paradox. For we have described what the shape of the impossible language is, and in the course of doing this, we have constructed the counterexample to the prediction. For instance, many theoretical syntacticians will construct their theory in such a way that

¹ Even if we 'explain' why we find property P in a given language L, without explicitly discussing other languages, we still predict that 'No language can exist with all (relevant) properties of L, but without P'.

it can be expected that word order in a phrase is never dictated by the coincidences of alphabetical ordering in any natural language. However, such a language is easily constructed (say, English* in which the lexicon of English is combined with a very simple grammar which says just this: the earlier in the dictionary, the earlier in the phrase.)

This implication is acknowledged by most, if not all, interlinguists as well. These scholars subsequently draw one of two possible conclusions: either they work on a kind of language studies that cannot be considered as part of linguistics in the naturalistic sense at all, but rather, as a kind of philology, studying planned language systems like other pieces of cultural heritage using linguistic material, such as literature or oral ritual; or as a branch of political studies, studying the processes of decision making regarding language in the same way other people study agricultural politics or the way women's rights are implemented. These are respectable and important academic disciplines, but they fall outside of the scope of this article.

Yet many interlinguists still consider themselves linguists, and some of them even see their work as contributing to a general understanding of the notion '(natural) language'. They proclaim themselves to be less interested in the process of language planning itself than in the way living people deal with such a language, either as an individual speaker, or as a community. I think that this is one of the more important reasons why many interlinguists in actual fact turn out to be mainly concerned with Esperanto studies. Esperanto clearly is the most successful among planned languages, in the sense that in the course of approximately 115 years it has gained an admittedly small yet stable speech community that has used it in a relatively wide range of contexts.

In an influential article (Blanke 1989), one of the leaders in the field of interlinguistics, has argued that we should distinguish between three main groups of planned language systems:

- “1. Planned language projects (steps 1-4).
2. Planned semi-languages. This means systems which have gone part of the way towards becoming a language and in principle would have been able or still could become a language, given the necessary political conditions with regard to language. They have passed through steps 1-9.
3. The only planned language which really has functioned, up to now, is Esperanto [...], which has reached the 19th step of the socialization process.”²

(Blanke 1989:70)

The definition which Blanke provides of *planned semi-languages* somewhat resembles what I have said about *possible languages*: if the political and other conditions would be right, they could still start functioning as a language.

²Cf. Corsetti (1999) for a critical evaluation of this assessment of the stage of evolution Esperanto is in. According to Corsetti, “In my opinion, the process by which Esperanto has become a real language has in fact not been completed yet. In other words, Esperanto is a normal, complete language for only part of its speakers — those who only use it. In the meanwhile, another part — those who mainly occupy themselves with studying it and writing in it — are still inclined to treat it as a language project.” [my translation]. Corsetti thus does not question the validity of Blanke's classification itself, but only the relative position Esperanto takes in it.

However, this is also true of the systems in 1: the Blankean system more or less presupposes the notion *possible language*.

Blanke's classification is based on a system of 19 'steps', a planned system has to go through in order to become a 'real' language, in the view of Blanke. The first step is (Blanke 1989:69) 'publication of its structure', the last step is 'bilingualism (involving an ethnic and a planned language) of children in (most often international) families'. Examples of intervening steps are 'international correspondence' (step 3), 'the appearance of certain (small) journals' (step 6), 'application in speech' (step 9), 'a developed network of national and international organizations' (step 11), 'regular radio-programs' (step 16) and 'a certain evolution of independent cultural elements linked to the language community' (step 18).

The specific ordering of steps may seem somewhat arbitrary -- it is hard to find an *a priori* reason why a new language project could not be used in speech without ever having been used as a means of communication -- but the general trend of Blanke's (1989) argument is clear: a language is a means of communication (in written correspondence, in speech, in articles in journals, etc.) that is ideally embedded within a culture. The most 'natural' type of language, furthermore, is a language that is used within families, and acquired by children.

In particular the last step is considered very important by many interlinguists, and this should not come as a surprise, given the importance that is attached to the notion 'native speaker' in many branches of language studies. If a system is acquired as a mother tongue by young children, it is a natural language almost by definition.

Among the linguistic students of Esperanto, the notion 'creolisation' has become quite popular (cf. Lindstedt 1997, Corsetti 1999). In the course of its evolution, Esperanto would have become creolised by its native speakers, approximately in the same way that creole languages have developed (usually from heavily simplified semilinguistic systems called pidgins). Everybody knows that creole languages are natural languages, if only because creolisation is a spontaneous process, not arising out of an act of free will. The conclusion we can draw from this is that Esperanto is also a natural language.

One of the weak spots in this argumentation, in my view, is the quality of the language of Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto, himself. The complete works of Zamenhof are still very easily accessible for the present day speaker of Esperanto. There may be a few differences between Zamenhof's use of the language and present-day usage, but these mainly concern lexical elements and furthermore, the differences are not much bigger than in the case of nineteenth century authors in other (European) languages. The differences between Zamenhof's language and the language of a 21st-century native speaker are certainly not as big as that between a pidgin and a creole. One gets the impression — which as a matter of course is difficult to quantify — that Zamenhof was already using something very close to a full-fledged language; a system in which he was able to convey all of his thoughts without a lot of problems. This raises the question how this is possible, given the fact that Zamenhof was not a native speaker of Esperanto, probably never even met a native speaker, did not hear radio programmes, etc. Even during the period when Esperanto was only starting to make the first of Blanke's steps, it was already a 'real' — or in my terminology at least a 'possible' — language for at least one of its speakers.

If this is true for one system, it might be true for others. The question whether a 'natural' language can arise out of an act of free will is still an open one. I think that some more light can be shed on this if we study some of those systems in more detail. First I consider two alternatives to Esperanto and argue that they, like Esperanto, are at least 'possible' systems. Next, I consider two systems which have been constructed on different principles and for which the label 'possible language' poses more problems.

2. Alternatives to Esperanto: Interlingua and Ido

Next to Esperanto, literally hundreds of projects for an international planned language have been proposed in Europe alone. In the interlinguistics literature, these have been classified in various ways. One of the most popular distinctions is the one between *a-priori systems*, in which the morphemes do not bear resemblance to those in any existing language, and *a posteriori systems*, in which the words are derived (possibly in some adapted form) from existing languages, usually Romance. Another is the distinction between *philosophical languages*, which have as one of their goals to improve the way people think and the precision of the way they communicate their thoughts, and *international languages*, which are intended to serve for interethnic communication across language barriers. (A priori systems are usually philosophical, and international languages often have a substantial a posteriori component, but the implication is not as strong in the other direction.)

On the other hand, we hardly find taxonomies based on grammatical structures, such as are most common in the typology of 'natural' language (say, SOV vs. SVO, unaccusative vs. unergative, stress accent vs. tone). I think that the reason for this is that the grammars for all proposed international languages are very similar. This in turn may be explained by the common goal international-language planners have: building a language system that is maximally simple and suitable for international human communication (Large 1985). For most language planners, this produces a language system that is very similar to the interlanguage described by Klein and Perdue in recent work (Klein and Perdue 1997): it has a very simple 'regular' inflectional morphology (exactly one ending for every paradigm) and a syntax that is fairly unmarked from a cross-linguistic point of view (e.g. SVO word order). There is a handful of points on which interlinguists disagree. Most famous among these is the issue of whether thematic relations should be expressed as morphological case or in terms of a strict word order (Jespersen 1928, Waringhien 1989). Mostly, however, language planners are not even very explicit about the syntactic structure, apparently assuming that any sensible person will agree as to the correct way of achieving simplicity (for second-language learners) in grammar.

Neither of the competing systems can pride itself on a very large social basis, but at least some of them still have some community of speakers and interested individuals, which is visible among other things through activities on the Internet. By this criterion, then, Interlingua is the most vivid planned language project next to Esperanto to date.³ At least one regular

³For what it is worth: with the Fast search engine (<http://www.alltheweb.com/>) on December 20 1999 gives 4,512 hits for Interlingua, 93 for "Ido linguo" (searching "Ido")

journal (*Panorama*) is published in the language, dealing with general topics and the Interlingua movement; there is an active website (3.XII.1999, <http://www.interlingua.com/>); there is a possibility to listen to radio programmes on the Internet;⁴ every second year, a small international conference is organized; one can order a variety of books, including literary work (almost exclusively translations). All in all, one could argue that Interlingua is well on its way in having set many, or even most, of Blanke's steps. There are no recorded cases of native language acquisition of Interlingua, as far as I am aware.

Interlingua has been designed by a committee of the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA, established 1924). The aim of IALA was to establish which was the best solution to the international language problems. After a while, it was decided that a new planned language was necessary in order to achieve this. (Gode and Blair 1951)

Most effort has been spent on the vocabulary of the language:

Our aim is not to 'make' a new international language, but to present the international vocabulary standardized in its most general form with only such complements of words as are supported by natural languages.

(a member of IALA, cited in Sack 1951 and Large 1985)

Constructing an international language according to the principles of IALA, mainly involved establishing what were the words of this international vocabulary. A fixed method was established to 'discover' the international words for a given concept. The basic idea behind IALA is that the international language does not need to be created; it is already present in the international vocabulary of science and technology, which is largely Latin and Greek. Gode, an American linguist that played a key role in the construction committee of Interlingua, often quoted the concept of 'Standard Average European' of the famous linguist Whorf. Interlingua was to European national languages what these languages once were to their dialects. The simplification of grammar followed a similar route: only those grammatical features were included, which were present in all of the control languages. In this way, 'unnecessary' details were avoided.

According to the IALA-ideology, then, Interlingua was a (standard) language from the moment of its inception. Since the language is nowadays used in various situations, it also satisfies many other criteria for being a language. The least we can say about it is that it seems a possible language, even though strictly speaking we have no evidence that it could stand the final test of actual languagehood, viz. acquisition by a native speaker. Many linguistic questions could be asked about the speakers of the language, just as well as about those of any other (second) language.

Similar observations can be made about Ido (Beaufront 1918). This language has been created in 1906 by Louis Couturat and Louis de Beaufront (the relative part these two men played in the creation process is still not very clear) as an 'improved Esperanto': *ido* is an Esperanto word meaning 'offspring'. Like several other people at the time, Couturat and

gives 103,896 hits, but the first 50 of these have no connection to the language), 740 for Volapük, and 219,604 for Esperanto.

⁴It has to be noticed that the radio programmes offered in December 1999 are dated May 1997.

Beaufront were unhappy about certain details in the orthography, morphology and morpheme stock of Zamenhof's Esperanto. Ido was intended to remedy these problems, but Ido and Esperanto are still mutually understandable to a large extent.

Like Interlingua, Ido still has an unknown number of supporters, organised in a few associations, the most lively one of which seems to be the *Uniono por la Linguo Internaciona* (ULI). This association organizes international conferences, which seem to have occurred in 1998 in Poland (Bialobrzegi) and in 1999 in Germany (Wuppertal). On the Internet, we can find some personal homepages, a few literary translations, including parts of the Bible, and articles from Ido press (including a general magazine *Progreso* and a journal for homosexuals (so for a rather specialized audience): *La Kordiego Geyal*). I have also found a discussion list that seems to be quite lively.⁵ It is difficult to assess the number of speakers of Ido. According to Blanke (p.c.) it is even smaller than that of speakers of Interlingua and will not exceed 100.

A special problem that Ido poses for the student of the notion 'natural language' who wishes to distinguish between 'projects' and 'real languages' in the Blankean sense, is that the grammar of Ido in many respects is not very different from Esperanto. The 'improvements' the creators of Ido made over Esperanto mainly involve the morpheme inventory on the one hand, and the some minor details in the morphology in the other (e.g. other than Esperanto, Ido does not distinguish between nominative and accusative case and does not display agreement between adjective and plural noun.) None of these seem particularly exciting, or crucial from the point of view of linguistic naturalness.⁶ A typical Esperanto text can be rendered into correct Ido by a word-by-word translation and vice versa. Given these facts, then, it seems hard to not at least award the predicate of 'possible language' to Ido, even though strictly we cannot be sure. It is possible in principle that some of the changes Idists have introduced in their language make the system unlearnable as a mother tongue.

It seems to me that Interlingua, Ido and Esperanto are not dramatically different from the perspective chosen in this article. All three are possible languages, which have grown to become actual languages to some extent. The grammars of all three languages are remarkably similar, despite a few superficial differences. As a matter of fact, most artificial language projects intended for international communication seem to have a lot in common. Interestingly, Zamenhof (1989-1991.I:255), the creator of Esperanto, himself remarked on this topic:

⁵I checked the archives of the list (<http://www.egroups.com/group/idolisto>) on December 18 1999. According to the group's statistics 142 messages had been sent out in March (when the group started), 168 in April, 165 in May, 148 in June, 275 in July, 236 in August, 222 in September, 278 in October, 246 in November and 74 in December.

⁶ Many of the changes were introduced into Ido in order to make it look more 'natural'; e.g. the Esperanto word for 'mother' *patrino* (which can be analysed as a combination of a stem *patr-* with a feminine suffix *-in-*) was replaced by the 'more natural' *matro*. Yet even if we could grant that it is somehow 'unnatural' in an interesting sense, to derive the word for 'mother' from that for 'father', one could argue that the combination *patrin-* is non-transparent in Esperanto, with the simplex meaning 'mother'. The replacement of this arbitrary form (in the Saussurean sense) with some other arbitrary form cannot add much to the relative naturalness of the linguistic system; yet it would also be surprising if it would make the system *less* natural.

This is a very natural matter, the grammar of an artificial language could not even be different, and if it would be different, this would not be a lack of genius, but simply madness. Can we consider it a merit for a man who creates a canal, if he makes it straight and without irregularities like all natural rivers? [...] Then who would get the idea to introduce several declinations, if he can content himself with one?

According to Zamenhof, somebody who creates a language for international communication, would do best to make this as simple, as 'straight', as possible. Apparently, he also thought there was only one way to draw a straight line, and from my (admittedly superficial) study of some alternative systems, I think he was right. There seems to be a class of 'international' language systems, which all represent the same (possible) scheme, and some of which have grown into actual languages.

3. *On the edge: Europanto and Spocanian*

In this section, I will briefly consider two language systems which, unlike Interlingua and Ido, are not intended to be direct competitors to Esperanto: Europanto and Spocanian. The principles used in the design of these two systems are quite different from that of the ones discussed until now, as well as from each other. Europanto is supposed to have no grammar at all, except maybe that of English. Spocanian is not specifically designed to be acquired (as a second language) at all; its grammar is very detailed and complex and basically designed for its own sake.

I turn to Europanto first. This system originated from a joke, when Diego Marani, a translator at the European Union in Brussels launched a humoristic column in the Belgian weekly *Le Soir Illustré*. In this column he discussed current European political issues in a mixture of languages that was understandable for (and made a humoristic impression on) a Belgian readership (i.e. most words were drawn from either 'international' English or one of the three official languages of Belgium — Dutch, French and German). The name clearly was intended as a parody on the concept of Esperanto on the one hand and the 'eurobabble' that is considered typical for official European institutions on the other.

The column evoked a lot of public interest all over Europe, and even though Marani still occasionally writes his humoristic column, he also seems to have developed a few more serious thoughts regarding his system, and the differences between Europanto on the one hand and systems such as Esperanto on the other. According to him, Europanto should be seen as an evolvement of 'international English', in which people use a word from their native language (or some other commonly shared language), if they do not remember the English word. In an article 'Europanto. From productive process to a language', published on an Europanto website, Marani writes about his language:

Rather than an artificial language, it [Europanto] is a system for the creation of a new language of the future. It is intended to give voice to the frustrations of the vast majority of people who are forced to use English even though their command of the language is not very good.

This can be achieved by speeding up the process of the internationalization of the English language and by its isolation from

the Anglo-American culture. [...] The mechanism is very simple. Nowadays, virtually everyone knows a few words of English and is capable of putting together very simple sentences, but most people are unable to speak the language properly because they do not know all the nuances, the subtle differences in meaning that only a mother-tongue speaker knows. In a conversation in English between two non-native speakers with just a smattering of the language, the register is naturally very low and only the basic message is communicated - often little more than could have been achieved by gesticulating. But what would happen if the two speakers could enrich their vocabulary with words from their own languages or from other important European languages? The worst that would happen is that the level of understanding would remain the same. If, however, the words used were similar to ones in the other person's language or were somehow recognized, then their mutual understanding would be enhanced. This is the mechanism on which Europanto is based. (Marani 1999?)

In other words, Europanto is the name for a pidgin-like system that is developing naturally in Europe. As a pidgin, it cannot be codified in any way. There is nothing like a 'grammatically incorrect' Europanto phrase:

What has been said so far should make it easier to understand the role of Europanto. Europanto is not an artificial universal language that can be used as an alternative to Esperanto, nor is it intended to replace English in international relations. Making use of past experience and new information technologies, it would not only be possible, but also very easy, to codify a Europanto grammar, making Europanto another artificial language like Esperanto. But that would be a mistake. Europanto would become just another elitist language, spoken by a small group of enthusiasts, but totally ignored by the rest of the world. (*ibid.*)

This deliberate grammatical anarchism makes it difficult to consider Europanto a real language in the sense of the systems just described. In the first place, it can only be used in certain specific circumstances, viz. if the speaker/writer has a good knowledge of the shared linguistic background between himself and his intended audience. In the absence of such knowledge, he probably has to take recourse to English. This implies that Europanto can never take all the Blanckian steps mentioned above, at least not as an entity that can be distinguished from (international) English.

On the other hand, if Marani is right, and something like Europanto is presently developing in Europe, one can imagine that it will stabilize after a certain period of time. After such a period, it would become possible to write grammars and dictionaries. Until that point however, Europanto is 'a system for the creation of a new language of the future' rather than a language (artificial or natural), indeed. This does not necessarily mean that Europanto-like tokens cannot be the object of linguistic study, of course; quite to the contrary, they could be seen as results of a novel type of language contact.

At first sight, Spocanian is more or less the opposite of Europanto. The latter may be a natural process, but is not really a language. Spocanian

on the other hand may be a real language, but of all the cases discussed here has the fewest characteristics of a natural system.

Spocanian has been constructed over the past 40 years by Rolandt Tweehuysen, a Dutch writer and linguist. He does not have philosophical or political intentions with the language, which is constructed for its own sake. He has started working on the language, as a language of an imaginary but realistic society, when he was a child and continued to work on it ever since. An important aspect of his work is that he claims to never really to have *changed* anything to the language, only added elements to it, and this in an intuitive way. Another important aspect is that literally nothing has been done to simplify the task of the learner of the language:

Spocanian is the result of almost 35 years of playing around with grammar rules and etymology, and is not intended as a follow-up of a language like Esperanto. In fact, Spocanian is not able to be this, for its morphology, syntax, pragmatics, pronunciation and lexicon are too complex and have an undesirable quantity of irregularities, as seems to be inherent in most natural languages. At this moment, its grammar consists of approx. 1500 pages, and its dictionary contains over 25,000 entries, with a lot of idiom, proverbs and untranslatable words (often referring to Spocanian culture). It took approx. 25 years to complete the Spocanian grammar book, and if a linguist accepts the fact that everything in this grammar has been invented intuitively, creatively and practically without any linguistic background, one also has to accept that all these data can be analysed within a specific linguistic framework, in order to determine to what extent this language is "possible".
(Tweehuysen 1994)

As can be seen from this quotation, Tweehuysen has displayed some interest as a linguist in his own creation. In his own view, his relative naiveté as a language creator is sufficient to make it worthwhile to take Spocanian seriously. In order to test this, he sent a message to the widely read Linguist List on the Internet (<http://www.linguistlist.org/>, 1994) in which he discussed some of the more exotic construction types, without revealing the identity of his language, and asking his fellow linguists for help and advice. The quotation above is from his second message to the Linguist List, in which he summarized the responses he received from his colleagues, and gives some more details about the language system and the society in which it should be placed. For Tweehuysen (like for Blanke) a language cannot exist without a community that uses it. He therefore has invented a society alongside the language:

My main goal was to create a language that would be "as real and realistic as possible". Someone studying the grammar must have the impression that (s)he is reading the grammar of a natural, unfamiliar exotic language. And as, by definition, any natural language is spoken by people in a natural setting, the kingdom of Spocania is a necessary basis for such a language. All languages show the influence of cultural, geographical, political, historical and climatological circumstances in which the people, speaking those languages, have to live.
(*ibid*)

Several problems arise. In the first place, it turned out that many of the linguists who responded to Tweehuysen's first message, expressed their scepticism regarding the reality of the language data he gave. Spocanian has some characteristics that are completely unknown in (other) natural languages. (E.g. it expresses tense differences by word order, so that 'I have seen him' is expressed by the Spocanian equivalent of 'see I him' and 'I will see him' by something like 'I him see', while 'I see him' gets a word-by-word translation.) In the message quoted above, Tweehuysen also remarks that "people are inclined to reject the "natural existence" of a language as soon as one encounters syntactic solutions that are not found in any other language, whereas no one is inclined to accept a language as "natural" upon recognizing syntactic phenomena that bear a remarkable resemblance to those in other languages." This seems to me to be a valid response to the objection. The fact that something has not been encountered in any indisputably natural language, cannot in itself be seen as an indication that the process itself is unnatural.

In Dutch, third person neutral pronoun cannot occur next to a preposition: *'Hij staat op het' (litt. He stands on it) is ungrammatical. In these cases, some special element *er* 'there' occurs which is placed *before* the preposition: 'Hij staat erop' (remnants of this can be found in English *therefor* etc.). This *er* can occur at some remarkable distance from the preposition in some constructions: 'Zij zegt dat hij er al de hele dag zonder iets te zeggen op staat' (She says that he is standing on it during the whole day already, without saying anything; litt. She says that he *there* the whole day without something to say *on* stands). The fact that this construction type is probably unique for Dutch (and its cognate German) does not make an artificial language, or the construction something to be left out of consideration by linguistic theory.

Esperanto also has a few characteristics which are unique to it, as far as I know. For instance, it can add the accusative ending *-n* to locative adverbs in order to create a directional meaning: *Mi estas hejme* (I am (at) home) vs. *Mi iras hejmen* (I am going (to) home). This is then an 'unnatural' aspect of the language, but as far as I am aware it does not create any specific problems for native or non-native speakers. It certainly does not seem more difficult than the more 'natural' distinction between nominative and accusative in order to distinguish subjects from objects.

The analytical problem with Spocanian is that this argument does not carry over to it without problems, since there are no real speakers of the language. There certainly are no native speakers outside of imaginary Spocania, but as a matter of fact there even are no fluent non-native speakers. Tweehuysen himself (p.c.) observes that he experiences problems reading, writing, speaking, and particularly understanding the language, since he never had the opportunity to get trained in this. If he tapes a Spocanian speech and listens to it after a reasonable number of months, he experiences problems understanding what he says.

What this means, in my view, is that in the end we cannot really be sure that Spocanian is a real language, since a crucial test is missing: the use by an actual community of speakers, however small. We have a *Gedankenexperiment*, which is the Spocanian community, and the fact that this community is quite realistic may or may not convince us that Spocanian is at least a possible language. However, since we do not know what such a community would do to the language, we also cannot be sure that every

aspect of the constructed system would be carried over to the actual language.

In my view, many aspects of Spocanian could also be the object of serious linguistic study even regardless of the question whether it is a possible language. In the first place, Tweehuysen as a linguist is not as interested in all aspects of linguistic structure; for instance, the synchronic phonology (syllable structure and the like) does not seem to be a topic to which he has devoted a lot of attention, and therefore this has probably stayed outside his conscious control. One could study what the resulting structure is, and how this relates to other languages.

The issue in the case of Spocanian is approximately the following in my view. Suppose we have a linguistic theory which makes a prediction 'a language which has property X should also have property Y'; and suppose that Spocanian is the only language which has property X. In that case, it would be very interesting indeed to study Spocanian. If this language also has property Y, this can be seen as a confirmation of the theory. However, if this language demonstrably does not have property Y, we should be more cautious. Only if we can be sure that the fact that Y is missing is not some artifact of the creation process, this could be taken as an indication that the theory is wrong. (Still, very few linguists would probably be willing to accept this conclusion.)

Even if Spocanian is the most problematic case discussed in this article, some of Tweehuysen's remarks are worth to be taken seriously:

My only problem is: art and literature are commonly accepted as products of creativity and intuition. They are regarded as autonomous, and are thus suitable as an object of study. A language like Spocanian, however, is *not* commonly accepted as such, and the question whether it can be an object of study is [still] controversial.

I think that the real reason for the difference in academic attention between novels and poems on the one hand and invented languages on the other is a different one. Unless we are willing to establish a separate discipline of 'artificial language studies' which would use for instance the hermeneutic methodology of other art studies, constructed languages can only be studied applying a linguistic methodology. And linguists shy away from issues of the human free will; I repeat that I think that this is for good reasons.

4. Conclusion

The conclusions of this article can only be preliminary. Many linguists are hesitant to take constructed languages into consideration. Partly this maybe for good reasons, but on the other hand, this also implies that important questions as to the precise meaning of the labels 'artificial' vs. 'natural language' are left out of consideration. Many interlinguists follow this general trend and restrict themselves to the less controversial cases such as Esperanto. Again, this is not surprising, in this case also for sociological reasons (interlinguistics already is a discipline without a lot of academic prestige without taking too controversial stands on this issue) but it also means that some important questions are not addressed. Esperanto is the most interesting and spectacular case of a planned language to date, and such deserves much more academic attention than it gets. But one

conclusion we can draw from the material presented here is that even within the history of Esperanto, it does not make sense to draw very strong borderlines between periods in which it was 'just a project' (viz. when only Zamenhof was aware of its existence) and others where it was a 'language'. I proposed that this type of distinction can be complemented by another one, viz. between 'possible' and 'actual' languages (somewhat parallel to the familiar distinction between 'possible' and 'actual' words in the study of morphology and phonology). Linguistics should concern itself among other things with the characterisation of the notion 'possible language'; in order to do this, it is helpful to study cases of possibly impossible systems, or systems which never grew into actual languages.⁷

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⁷ One very interesting case of a constructed language has been left out of consideration here; this is Klingon, the language that was designed by the linguist Marc Okrand by use of extraterrestrial people called the Klingons in the television series Star Trek and which has grown into a kind of cult object for certain fans of the Star Trek series. Cf. Hermans (1999) for a preliminary sociolinguistic study on the (actual) speakers of this language. =

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