

Transpiranto: antisemitism, xenophobia, or just a joke?

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Abstract. In 1929, the Swedish comic magazine *Grönköpings veckoblad* published an article about a new planned language called Transpiranto. From 1948, the magazine regularly published texts in Transpiranto, usually translations of Swedish poems and original pompous trash. Transpiranto is not a complete language, but a mixture of European languages with traits of Esperanto vocabulary and grammar.

From 1960 until this day, Transpiranto generally was interpreted as a joke about Esperanto—friendly or malicious.

This study explores how the existence of Transpiranto was understood from 1929 until now, whether the joke language had any ties to antisemitism, which was abundant in Swedish comic papers in the early 20th century, and the reasons for changes in the understanding about Transpiranto.

Resumo. *Transpiranto: ĉu antisemitismo, ksenofobio aŭ nur ŝerco?*

En 1929 la sveda humura magazino *Grönköpings veckoblad* publikigis artikolon pri nova planlingvo nomita Transpiranto. Ekde 1948 la magazino regule aperigis tekstojn en Transpiranto, ĉefe tradukojn de svedaj poemoj kaj naivaĉajn originalaĵojn. Transpiranto ne estas kompleta lingvo sed miksaĵo de eŭroplingvaj vortoj kun trajtoj de esperanta vortaro kaj gramatiko.

Ekde 1960 ĝis nia tempo Transpiranto ĝenerale estis konsiderata kiel ŝerco pri esperanto — amika aŭ malamika. Tiu ĉi studo esploras kiel la ekzisto de Transpiranto estis interpretata ekde 1929 ĝis nun, ĉu la ŝerca lingvo iel rilatis al antisemitismo, kiu abundis en svedaj komikaj magazinoj en la fruaj 1900-aj jaroj, kaj la kaŭzojn de ŝanĝiĝoj en la kompreno de Transpiranto.

1. Esperanto and other planned languages

In 1887, Lejzer Ludwik Zamenhof, an ophthalmologist living in Warsaw, and a Jew influenced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the Jewish

Haskalah, with Russian as his father tongue and Yiddish as his mother tongue, published the first books on the international planned language *Lingvo Internacia*. Later it came to be known as *Esperanto*, which in the beginning was the alias of Zamenhof: *Doktoro Esperanto* ‘The doctor who hopes’. The language was intended to become a means of international communication beside the national languages, and to be a contribution to a more peaceful world.

Esperanto was spread around the world. Local Esperanto clubs were founded and Esperantists met at international congresses. The language got its own literature and its own native speakers when Esperanto-speaking couples gave birth to Esperanto-speaking children. In the period 1920–1925, the League of Nations discussed a proposal about Esperanto as an international language, a proposal which suffered defeat. Esperanto, however, went on to be popular among people in many countries.

In 1927–1928, for example, *Arbetarnas bildningsförbund*, ABF (Workers’ Educational Association) in Sweden organized 149 study circles in Esperanto, beside 155 in English, 42 in German and 2 in French. During the summer of 1928, courses for teachers were organized. In 1929, one thousand participants followed a second-level correspondence course. The Swedish state radio channel *Radiotjänst* broadcast two hours of an Esperanto course every week. In 1933–1934, ABF organized 538 study circles in Esperanto, to be compared with 438 in English, 124 in German and 10 in French. (Kováts 2011:20.)

During the 1930s, Esperantists in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were severely persecuted. The totalitarian regimes in these countries did not have any reason to support a language movement which had as a goal to facilitate communication between the peoples of the world. For the Nazis, the fact that Zamenhof was a Jew was another reason to oppose Esperanto. Adolf Hitler (1941:337), quoted by Lins (1988:98), meant that Esperanto was to serve as a tool for the Jews to rule over other peoples.

There were also people who opposed Esperanto for other reasons. They thought that a planned language was needed for international communication but that there were some shortcomings in the grammar, vocabulary, or orthography of Esperanto, and that the general public did not accept it for that reason. Stojan (1929:520–526) publishes texts in 64 planned languages, most of them candidates for the role as an international language and published between 1887 (when Esperanto was published) and 1928. Also after this year, new planned languages were published. Many of them were influenced to a large extent by the grammar and vocabulary of Esperanto. The best known planned languages which were intended to become international were Ido, Occidental and Interlingua. Esperanto, however, went on to be the most frequently used planned language, with its own culture and native speakers.

2. Transpiranto and Esperanto in *Grönköpings veckoblad*

The Swedish comic magazine *Grönköpings veckoblad* published the first text in Transpiranto in 1929 (1929:8:3–4). Grönköping is a fictional Swedish town and the name of the magazine is translated as ‘The Grönköping Weekly’ (published monthly). Grönköping is characterized as a Sweden in miniature. The magazine describes current events in Sweden in a local fictional context. The heading of the article is “Världsspråk i Grönköpings Skola” ‘World language in the school of Grönköping’. In the article it is written that the idea about a world language has begun to grow in the Swedish schools. The older national “killing” languages have been popular for a long time, but they have not promoted any peace. The schoolmaster Hagwald has hesitated which world language he should teach—Esperanto, Idozan or the language of Professor Wolapyk (sic). He decided not to wait and see which of them would emerge victorious from the battle between them. Therefore he decided to create his own language, Transpiranto. The article also gives some examples of Transpiranto words and a translation of the first strophe of the Finnish national anthem:

Va paj, va paj, va farsipaj,
falsette glossan kar!
Nek hivas alpan celestaj,
nek firas kjuson, diskas kaj,
amandalundo kvam Polar,
kvam fadripajan var.

Original by Johan Ludvig Runeberg,
1846, in Swedish:
Vårt land, vårt land

Vårt land, vårt land, vårt fosterland,
Ljud högt, o dyra ord!
Ej lyfts en höjd mot himlens rand,
Ej sänks en dal, ej sköljs en strand,
Mer älskad än vår bygd i nord,
än våra fäders jord.

The translation into Finnish
by Paavo Cajander:
Maamme

Oi maamme, Suomi, synnyinmaa,
soi, sana kultainen.
Ei laaksoa, ei kukkulaa,
ei vettä, rantaa rakkaampaa,
kuin kotimaa tää pohjoinen,
maa kallis isien.

Mr. Hagwald has applied for financial support from the state for the work with the language and invites to a correspondence course. The short texts in Transpiranto consist of a mixture of words in Swedish, Swedish slang, Latin, French, and Esperanto, many of them with endings from Esperanto grammar. Transpiranto is not a real language: the magazine only pretends that there is a language Transpiranto. One could call it a joke language. The magazine does not report any more about Transpiranto for many years.

Grönköpings veckoblad (1937:2:1) however reports about Esperanto. Mr. dr. Adam Matsson invites to a course in Esperanto. The fee is 25 Swedish crowns, which was a very high amount for a course in the 1930s. On the second page the magazine reports that Adam Matsson was a swindler, who taught *fikonspråket* ‘the Fig Language’ (a Swedish counterpart of rhyming slang), instead of Esperanto.

The author of Transpiranto was Nils Hasselskog (1892–1936), poet, writer and humorist (Amenius 1969:342).

Grönköpings veckoblad is totally silent about Transpiranto and Esperanto during almost 20 years, from 1930 to 1948.¹ In the year 1948 there appears an article (1948:1:2), in which it is written that the Transpiranto club of Grönköping has had a New Year party and that Ludvig Hagwald wrote a poem, which was read aloud. The poem is also quoted. Since 1948, original poetry and translations in Transpiranto appeared several times a year in *Grönköpings veckoblad*, but also in other Swedish papers and in Internet.

August Peterson, who was a close friend of Hasselskog, in his biography argues that the translation *Va paj, va paj, va farsipaj*, is a stinging criticism against the naïve peace optimism of the 1920s, which thought that humanity would be saved if everyone learnt the same language. This was said in an Esperanto congress in Skövde in 1924. (Peterson 1948:265.)

There are some testimonies about how the staff members of *Grönköpings veckoblad* describes Transpiranto. The longest article is written by Yngve Ågren (1899–1982): “Ett världsspråk och dess vrångbild, Esperanto och transpiranto — Ett utkast till analys” ‘Esperanto and Transpiranto. A world language and its distorted picture—Draft of an analysis’ (1960). Ågren himself was known as a song-text writer and was during many years a staff member of *Grönköpings veckoblad*, where he published pompous trash and Transpiranto translations (Ågren 2012). In his article he shortly relates the history of Esperanto and describes in very critical words the thought that Esperanto could contribute to a more peaceful world. He states that the optimism was starry-eyed and that in 1960 “Esperanto has collapsed to a puerile hobby for the poor in spirit, for dashing language amateurs, for mental health nuts. The course book used in our country [...] is a prime example of ignorance about words and of linguistic impotence” (1960:416). Then Ågren (1960:417–420) begins to examine the grammar and vocabulary of Esperanto. He condemns the language on several points and finally makes some proposals to improve

¹However, Hasselskog made one more translation into Transpiranto. A Swedish student song was translated into Transpiranto with the title *Kanta studjosi ekstrabon sjur* (different varieties of the spelling appear in different books, which indicates that the song has become an oral tradition). The translation was made for use in the student club *Juvenalorden*, in which Hasselskog was a member (Transpiranto — Grönköpings världsspråk! 2012). This translation, however, was not published in *Grönköpings veckoblad*.

the language, but concludes that there is only small hope that the Esperantists will accept any “improvement” of their language. Ågren (1960:422–427) further writes that Transpiranto when it was published in 1929 evidently was a joke about Esperanto and that the word *Transpiranto* because of its similarity with *Esperanto* is really malicious, because everyone laughs about it, with the exception of the Esperantists, who feel offended in their idealistic ardour.

Ebbe Vilborg (1966:179–182), a senior lecturer and docent in Classical Greek and an Esperanto speaker, in the article “La urbo, kiu ne ekzistas” ‘The town which does not exist’ states that Hasselskog shot some arrows against the “peace language movement,” but soon lost his interest. Vilborg also states that Hasselskog knew very little about Esperanto, and therefore the caricature is not a very good one. Vilborg thinks that the parody about Esperanto at the same time is a kind of compliment. The Esperanto movement is an existing phenomenon in modern society—therefore it is possible to make a parody about it, just as about any other phenomenon.

Later, descriptions about Transpiranto and Esperanto become more friendly. The anthology *Transpirantologia Svejsa* (J. Alfr-dsson V-stl-nd 1968:5) says that Transpiranto is the only one of the big world languages which has any future. The linguist Bengt Sigurd (1993:12) writes that Transpiranto is intended to “joke about Esperanto and other planned languages.” He also writes that “Esperanto, Interlingua and Bliss are well-established in our time, and play a role in the world, however not the role that their creators intended.” The web site of *Grönköpings veckoblad* writes: “Transpiranto of course is intended to be a friendly joke about Esperanto, the planned language which the Polish Doctor Ludvik Zamenhof constructed already in 1887 hoping that a common neutral language would contribute to understanding between the peoples.” (Transpiranto – Grönköpings världsspråk! 2012).

In the article in *Grönköpings veckoblad* of 1948 (1948:1:2) it was said that a poem was read by Ludvig Hagwald. A reader who knows that the creator of Esperanto was Ludwik Zamenhof, in this understand that Transpiranto is meant to be a joke about Esperanto. The fictional creator of Transpiranto in the first article about the language is said to be Schoolmaster Hagwald. Nothing is in fact written about his given name (1928:1:3–4). Articles in 1933 (1933:5:2) and 1935 (1935:9:3) about Hagwald (but not about Transpiranto) give him only the name Hr Magister Hagwald ‘Mr. Schoolmaster Hagwald’. Only in 1937 (1937:4:2) the name Hr folkmagister Ludvig Hagwald ‘Mr. People’s-Schoolmaster Ludvig Hagwald’ is used in the magazine. This is after the death of Nils Hasselskog, the real creator of Transpiranto. During Hasselskog’s lifetime, the fictional creator Hagwald was never said to have the name Ludvig, the given name of the creator of Esperanto.

3. Antisemitism in the Swedish comic press

Andersson (2000) has shown that antisemitism in Sweden 1900–1930 was hegemonic in the civil society in the sense that antisemitic ideas were understood to be self evident and given by nature. One cause of the modern antisemitism is that the Jews constitute a “non-national element in a world with growing and/or existing nations” (Hanna Arendt 1951:22). The Jews formed an international and at the same time non-national people. Its existence reminded us about the relativity of the borders. “In a world which was totally divided into nations, there was no place for internationalism and every small piece of No Man’s Land was an invitation to aggression” (Andersson 2000:24).

Frequent traits in the jokes about Jews in the comic press were for example jokes about Jews as avaricious and mean, jokes about the bodies of Jews, and jokes about the accent in which Jews were said to speak Swedish. Jews are described as incapable of learning Swedish or other European languages, but it is also said that Jews have secret languages in the same way as Gypsies do.

Andersson (2000:67–68) says that knowledge about certain comic magazines and their staff members is good. There are on the other hand few systematic studies about the magazines. Kerstin Wikberg (1978) has in her doctoral dissertation *Samhällets skrattspegel, Studier i Grönköpings Veckoblad* ‘The Comic Mirror of Society, Studies in *Grönköpings veckoblad*’, directed her energies to the prehistory of the magazine as a part of the journal *Söndags-Nisse* (1902–1915) and the period as an independent paper (1916–1925). *Transpiranto* appeared in 1929 and is therefore only mentioned in passing (1978:15). She writes that the comic press is the comic mirror of society, in which the fundamental norms, valuations, categorizations and conceptions appear more sharply than in other types of sources. However Wikberg (1978:13) states that the topic of the thesis is a delicate one and that she tried to tear as cautiously as possible the content of the dreams of the fiction, which the readers of the Weekly carry in their hearts. This cautiousness might of course conflict with the objectivity of science. Wikberg for example does not touch the question about antisemitic articles in *Grönköpings veckoblad*.

During the period 1917–1945, *Grönköpings veckoblad* publishes only a small number of articles where Jews were mentioned. In No. 11, 1934, one reports that Mr. Prof. Zondek plans to move to Grönköping but that Mr. Dr. Salvén and Mr. Dr. Åkerström have protested sharply. The article, which is published on the frontpage, mentions that the Jewish physician Hr Prof. Zondek wanted to open a clinic in Stockholm, but that 2,700 physicians moved for the rejection of the application. In Grönköping one physician and one veterinary protested and said a foreign person, familiar with the diseases of Jerusalem but who does not know anything about the diseases of Grönköping,

could cause a lack of patients in the town. In 1936:1:2, the paper reports that Grönköping has got its first Jew. An “equipment-Jew” from Berlin has moved to the town because he thinks that there is a possibility to earn money there.

Along with the articles about Jews, there are also articles about other nationalities. An article about the cabinet crisis in Italy claims that the main industry in Italy is barrel-organ-playing by organ grinders. Another article tells us that there are foreign visitors in the town: two Negroes, or one Catholic.

4. Analysis

Representatives for *Grönköpings veckoblad* from Ågren (1960) to the web site in 2012, as well as other Swedes, suppose that *Transpiranto* from the beginning was a joke about Esperanto. However, one must call that into question: If the comic magazine had the intention to joke about Esperanto, why did they not joke about Esperanto more clearly? If one reads the article about *Transpiranto* from 1929, it is absolutely clear that Mr. Hagwald acted like the tens or hundreds of people who created their own planned languages, because they thought that it was necessary to improve some details in Esperanto. (By the way: Ågren (1960), in his Esperanto-critical article, makes suggestions about changes in Esperanto, even if he does not create a new language as did Mr. Hagwald.)

The fact that there were many different planned languages probably was well known to the educated public in 1929. In 1960 and in our time, Esperanto is the only generally known planned language intended for international communication. *Transpiranto* is therefore supposed to be a joke about Esperanto, all the more so as their names are similar. But even the word *Transpiranto* was not necessarily a joke about Esperanto, because many of the new language projects—daughters of Esperanto—had similar names, like *Esperantido*, *Adjuvanto* and others.

Another fact that influenced some Swedes to think that *Transpiranto* from the beginning was a joke about Esperanto is the statement that the joke language was created by the fictional Schoolmaster Ludvig Hagwald in Grönköping. This statement appears for example in the web site of *Grönköpings veckoblad* in 2012 (*Transpiranto — Grönköpings världsspråk! 2012*). As was stated above, the original article about *Transpiranto* in 1929 did not mention any given name of Schoolmaster Hagwald (1929:8:3–4). The given name Ludvig for Mr. Hagwald appeared in *Grönköpings veckoblad* only in 1937 (1937:4:2), that is, after the death of Nils Hasselskog, the real creator of the joke language. This makes it probable that Nils Hasselskog did not have the idea to joke about Esperanto.

As Andersson (2000) explained, antisemitism was hegemonic in Swedish comic press in 1900–1930. Can this be an argument that Transpiranto nevertheless was an antisemitic joke, because of the Jewish background of Ludwik Zamenhof, the author of Esperanto? No. The first article about Transpiranto in 1929 does not mention Jews or Judaism at all. Jokes about Jews appeared very rarely in *Grönköpings veckoblad*. The joke about Mr. Prof. Zondek quoted above is probably more a joke about xenophobia than a joke about Jews. Antisemitism, by the way, became rarer in Swedish comic press during the 1930s for two reasons: Jews became more integrated into Swedish society; and the Nazis monopolized antisemitism in such a way that other people had to choose sides.

There are also other reasons why Transpiranto, which began as a joke about reformed versions of Esperanto, came to be understood as a joke about Esperanto. One reason is the strengthened position of the English language as a result of the victory of the Allies in the Second World War. In 1946, English replaced German as the first foreign language in the Swedish schools (Johansson 2004; Ellegård 1991:509). (Another reason of the strengthened position of English language in Sweden probably was the triumph of American films in Europe. Watching American films, working-class Swedes without higher education became acquainted with spoken English.) When the United Nations was founded, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish, but not German (the most spread language in Europe), were elected as official languages. The Esperanto movement was weakened after the persecutions in Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s and as a result of the Second World War. Firth (1964:70–71) argues that languages are successful and popular if the people who speak them have military or economic success. Ostler (2006:20) quotes Firth, but thinks that this is just a simplification. Reality is more complicated. Romance languages are still with us, although Roman rule in some countries were replaced by Germanic conquerors. This explains not only why English replaced German in the Swedish schools, but also why representatives of *Grönköpings veckoblad* began to understand Transpiranto as a joke about Esperanto. The same theory also explains why the article published in 1929 was not understood as a joke about Esperanto when it was published. In 1929, the Esperanto-movement was extremely successful, and a successful movement becomes popular. A successful movement has a lower risk of being joked about.

The story however does not end with the stronger role of English and the weaker role of Esperanto in Europe after the Second World War. Věra Barandovská-Frank (2012) has shown how conlangs, constructed languages, have become popular among people who consider such languages as an art or as a hobby. Some of them are interested in languages created for fantasy or science fiction. Other are just interested in investigating the possibilities

of making their own languages. In these groups, Esperanto is but a normal thing. There is, however, almost no interest in Esperanto as a world language candidate in the conlang communities—only about the language itself.

Beside this sociological explanation, there are also psychological explanations. The psychologist Claude Piron wrote about psychological reactions to Esperanto:

To a psychologist investigating reactions to the word “Esperanto” two facts are immediately apparent: a high percentage of those invited to give their opinion have a great deal to say about it; and they regard as self-evident, and in many cases cite without prompting, various statements which are contrary to verifiable reality, for example: “no one has ever written a novel straight into Esperanto,” “Esperanto is a language no one speaks,” “there are no children who have it as the mother tongue.” No one would ever comment for example Bulgarian or Indonesian in the same way, but he would simply admit that he does not know these languages. If, in order to get a control reaction for comparison, the researcher asks the subject to give his or her opinion about Bulgarian or Indonesian in the same way, he gets quite a different response. (Piron 1988)

Piron goes on to give some explanations why people who neither know Esperanto nor know anything about its culture, have such profound opinions about the language. Some explanations are about “defense mechanisms.” However, the passage about “underlying anxiety” is the most relevant in our discussion about Transpiranto and Esperanto. People often avoid change in the status quo. “In some respects, psychological resistance to Esperanto can be compared with the opposition encountered by the ideas of Christopher Columbus or Galileo: a stable, well ordered world found itself overturned by the new theories [. . .]” Another reason for the anxiety about Esperanto is that a language is not just an external social phenomenon, but a part of our personality. The mother tongue seems to the child as a kind of magical gift. The school presents the language as something unassailable and the key to all literary treasures. That strengthens the sentimental nucleus. If anybody then asserts that a planned language like Esperanto can function as well as one’s native language, it cannot be easily accepted by the individual. There is also a fear of infantile regression. Esperanto is simple, and that is confused with “over-simple” and “childish,” which gives rise to the notion that Esperanto cannot be used to express really adult thoughts at the highest level of abstraction. The factor of “simplicity” is isolated from the complement: unlimited possibilities of combination.

Detlev Blanke (2002) states that the word *Esperanto* has been used as a metaphor in many ways. He distinguishes between neutral/positive, ironic, and negative uses of the word. Transpiranto, together with words as *Desperanto*, *Emigranto* and *Europanto*, is treated in a section about word formation with *Esperanto* as a model. This category does not automatically

indicate any ironical or negative use of the word *Esperanto*. Almost all examples seem to be used in a neutral way.

The Indian economist Amartya Sen, who in 1998 received the *Sveriges Riksbank*² *Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel*, identified three categories in which westerners described India, Indian culture and tradition (Sen 2005:139–160). The exotic descriptions focused on wondrous and marvellous things, but do not give any balanced picture of India. The superior and authoritative descriptions are characterized by superiority and authority, and by Indian culture being regarded as primitive and non-cultural. The museological description has interest in classification and exhibition. We can use the same categories to understand the views on Esperanto. In the beginning of the 20th century, Esperantists and other people described Esperanto as a wondrous and marvellous language, which could give the world peace and understanding. The victory of the allies in the Second World War created a situation when Esperanto was described in an authoritative way as primitive and non-cultural. During the later last decades of the 20th century, Esperanto has become more and more examined and classified by linguists.

We can also use the same categories to understand different views on other phenomena in society, for example Jews and Judaism. There are exotic descriptions about Jews in the past and about the state of Israel in our time. There are authoritative descriptions, with antisemitic content; and there are museological descriptions.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that the original purpose, when *Grönköpings veckoblad* in 1929 published an article about Transpiranto, was not to joke about Esperanto or to offend Esperantists. It probably was a joke about the great number of planned languages published beside Esperanto. The continuous publishing of poems in Transpiranto since 1948 was however understood as a kind, or malicious, joke about Esperanto. The reason for this is the strengthened role of English in Europe and the weaker role of Esperanto, and furthermore psychological reasons as for example the language as a part of our personality.

There seems to be no direct connection between the article about Transpiranto of 1929 and the antisemitic tradition in the Swedish comic press. However, there is one indirect connection. In many cultures there has been a dislike or fear for people from other countries or from other cultures and for phenomena from other cultures. Antisemitism and unfounded hostility

²This is the Swedish name of the Swedish National Bank, which now insists on its use even in English. Earlier the bank used the name *Bank of Sweden*.

against Esperanto are two examples of this dislike. This hostility is, however, not rooted in the coming into existence of Transpiranto, but in the later understandings of its existence.

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