OF REVOLUTIONARIES AND GEEKS
MEDIATION, SPACE AND TIME AMONG ESPERANTO SPEAKERS

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities

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‘Not all people exist in the same Now’
Ernst Bloch (1990 [1962]: 97)

‘We’re not as numerous as we wanted, but we’re more than you can imagine’
Jak Le Puil, Esperantist from Île-de-France, 2017
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**Figure 16:** A meme in English, created by young Esperantists, joking about the fact that Esperanto has not become the ‘global lingua franca’ [Source: Group Esperantujo on Telegram, retrieved June 2018].
The following emic terms and acronyms are widely used by Esperantists. I explain them, providing also the Esperanto and English translations of the acronyms, at their first appearance in the thesis. They are listed below for further reference, as they reappear several times throughout the text. This list offers the official translations of the associations’ names. All other translations in the text are mine, unless specified otherwise. Regarding the acronyms that I only mention once in the text, I provide only the English translation, without the Esperanto title, as these are not essential for the understanding of the argument at stake.

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<th>English Description</th>
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<td>AFCE/FFEA</td>
<td><em>Association Française des Cheminots pour l'Espéranto</em> or <em>Franca Fervojista Esperanto-Asocio</em>, French Association of Esperanto Railway Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amikumum</td>
<td>A mobile phone app through which users can locate and contact fellow Esperanto speakers nearby, as well as speakers of other languages</td>
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<td>Akademio</td>
<td>Esperanto Academy, the institutional body responsible for overseeing, monitoring and stewarding the evolution of the language. Works on a voluntary basis, holding meetings once a year, during the Universal Congresses of Esperanto</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duolingo</td>
<td>Language-learning platform, made of a website and an app, that offers several free language courses. Also offers Esperanto courses in English, Spanish and Portuguese</td>
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<td>EDE</td>
<td><em>Europe Démocratie Espéranto</em>, political party Europe-Democracy-Esperanto</td>
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Esperanto speaker
Those who are learning or who can speak Esperanto, regardless of fluency, but who do not use this language to engage with fellow speakers on a regular basis or in a more meaningful way and who do not claim to participate in Esperantujo

Esperantist
Those who speak Esperanto regularly and/or who support Esperanto, join the Esperanto movement and Esperanto associations as activists, volunteers and members, and who participate in Esperantujo

Esperanto-movado
Esperanto movement

Esperantujo/
Esperantio
Esperanto community, sometimes also translated as *Esperantoland*

Finvenkismo/
Finvenkisto/
Fina venko
Refers to those Esperantists who advocate for the *fina venko* (the final victory), meaning an ideal moment in time when Esperanto would be widespread enough to be used as a de facto global language. Those who identify with this orientation and aspire to the spread of Esperanto along these lines – called *finvenkistoj* – are a minority in Esperantujo

Homaranismo
Philosophical and political programme behind Esperanto. As envisaged by Zamenhof, it would encourage people to affirm their humanness and to underplay their ethnicity and national backgrounds, inspiring Esperantists to perceive humankind as a brotherhood of peoples who share the same humanity. Homaranismo is the basis of what I call Esperanto’s ‘humanist cosmopolitanism’

IFEF
*Internacia Fervojoista Esperanto-Federacio*, International Federation of Esperanto Railway Workers

IJF
*Internacia Junulara Festivalo*, International Esperanto Youth Festival

IJK
*Internacia Junulara Kongreso*, International Esperanto Youth Congress

Interna ideo
Inner idea. Closely linked to Homaranismo, it conveyed
Zamenhof’s intent to use Esperanto to promote fraternity and justice among peoples. Throughout time, the internal ideology has changed, currently taking a more internationalist-multiculturalist shape.

**JEFO**  
*Junulara Esperanta Franca Organizo*, French Youth Esperanto Organisation, also known as *Espéranto Jeunes*

**Pasporta Servo**  
Hospitality service built upon an address book and an online-based directory and oriented at Esperantists. Works in a similar fashion to services such as Couchsurfing, having preceded the latter.

**Samideano**  
Fellow thinker, referring to those who speak Esperanto and share this language, but who also share the set of cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto.

**SAT**  

**SAT-Amikaro**  

**TEJO**  
*Tutmonda Esperantista Junulara Organizo*, World Esperantist Youth Organisation.

**UEA**  
*Universala Esperanto-Asocio*, Universal Esperanto Association. Headquartered in Rotterdam, the leading organisation in the neutral Esperanto movement.

**Verlan**  
A set of lexical varieties of French involving syllable inversions, popular among low-income young people in the Parisian banlieues.
OF REVOLUTIONARIES AND GEEKS: MEDIATION, SPACE AND TIME AMONG ESPERANTO SPEAKERS

The University of Manchester, School of Social Sciences, Social Anthropology

Guilherme Moreira Fians

Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities, 2019

Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among Esperanto speakers and Esperantists – mostly, but not only, in Paris – this thesis asks: how can the Esperanto community and movement come into being in practice if Esperanto speakers are scattered all over the world and may, at times, not share much beyond the language?

Created in the late nineteenth century and alternatively supported by intellectuals and left-wing activists since its early days, Esperanto has currently also attracted the interest of young people through its online use. Coming to be more than a language, it has developed a widespread, geographically scattered speech community, a language-based social movement, and a set of cosmopolitan principles and sociabilities linked to it.

I aim to contribute to debates about cosmopolitanism, globalisation, international communication, mobilities, and hopes for the future, as well as political, digital and language activism, by analysing perspectives of Esperanto speakers and Esperantists. Addressing the contrasting ideas that posit Esperanto as ‘a thing of the past’ and ‘the language of the future’, I look at the ways the language has been used in the present, through everyday practices, to mediate between people from different national backgrounds. France, particularly Paris, provides a setting in which my research questions resonate with national debates on politics and languages. This creates a fruitful environment to analyse how Esperanto is frequently seen through the lenses of either engagements with traditional social movements (such as communism, anarchism and pacifism) or as an intellectual game and tool to build sociability networks that extrapolate French territory. From these issues, my main argument is that the ephemeral nature of the enactments of the Esperanto community is what makes engagements with this language particularly appealing and productive for its speakers and supporters.
PRI REVOLUCIULOJ KAJ TEKNOLOGIEMULOJ: MEDIACIO, SPACO KAJ TEMPO INTER ESPERANTO-PAROLANTOJ

Universitato de Manĉestro, Fako pri Sociaj Sciencoj, Socia Antropologio

Doktoriĝo en la Fakultato pri Homaj Sciencoj, 2019

Surbaze de longdaŭra etnografia kampolaboro inter Esperanto-parolantoj kaj esperantistoj –plejparte, sed ne nur, en Parizo – mia disertacio demandas: kiel povas la Esperanto-komunumo kaj movado praktike ekzisti, se Esperanto-parolantoj estas ĉie en la mondo kaj, kelkfoje, ne havas multajn komunajn trajtojn krom la lingvo, kiun ili parolas?

Kreita en la fino de la deknaŭa jarcento kaj historie subtenata kaj de intelektuloj kaj de maldekstraj aktivuloj ekde ĝia kreado, Esperanto nuntempe ankaŭ interesigas junulojn per sia interreta uzo. Iĝante pli ol lingvo, Esperanto kreigis ampleksan kaj geografie dispelitan parolkomununomon, lingvon-bazitan socian movadon, kaj diversajn kosmopolitajn principojn kaj specojn de sociumado ligitajn al ĉi tiu lingvo.

Mi celas kontribui al debatoj pri kosmopolitismo, tutmondiĝo, internacia komunikado, internacia cirkulado kaj vojaĝado kiel peranto inter homoj de malsamaj naciecoj kaj lingvaj fonoj. Francio, ĉefe Parizo, estas loko kie miaj esplordemandoj koincidas kun naciaj debatoj pri politiko kaj lingvoj. Tio kreas fruktodonan medion por analizi kiel Esperanto estas ofte rigardata pere de engaĝigoj kun tradiciaj movadoj kaj politikaj agadkaŭzoj (kiel komunismo, anarkiismo kaj pacismo) aŭ, alimaniere, kiel intelekta ludo kaj ilo por konstrui sociumecajn retojn kiuj transiras la limojn de la franca teritorio. El ĉi tiuj diskutoj, mia ĉefa argumento estas, ke la efemera naturo de la materialigoj de la Esperanto-komunumo estas tiu kiu igas engaĝigojn kun ĉi tiu lingvo aparte allogan kaj produktivan por siaj parolantoj kaj subtenantoj.
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For Ngân and Regina,
the women of my life
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This thesis began as a simple quest for answers, and never ended. But never ended for a very good reason: one question was constantly leading me to others, and I was frequently encountering people along the way who pushed me further. I started to write it almost on my own and, similarly to Deleuze and Guattari’s *thousand plateaus* (but less poetic), at the end of it, we were quite a crowd, with many people sharing an interest in what I was doing, thinking with me and encouraging my endeavour.

My first thanks goes to Stef Jansen, who always had encouraging and supporting words to share, not only about anthropology, but about life in general. As a careful reader and sharp interlocutor, Stef continuously instigated my curiosity, helped me to improve my arguments and, above all, made my writing properly inductive. I am also grateful to Angela Torresan, who, as a helpful critic, showed me where I could improve in the last stages of my writing-up. I also owe a profound debt to Arandi Gomes Teixeira, who introduced me to Esperanto. Without our conversations, I might never have learned this language. I was also lucky to meet Fernando Pita, who helped me to give shape to my research proposal.

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and to my life; to Regina Fians, who keeps teaching and inspiring me and doing more than a mother could do. To Ngân and Regina, I also thank for their patience during my absences and their eternal willingness to listen to me attentively when I asked their opinion about my research. I also wish to thank Pedro Fians, who always encouraged me and raised me with affection; to Wilson and Suely Moreira, for all the conversations and happy moments we spent together; to Erica and Vinicius Moreira, for listening attentively to my all-too-frequent complaints about life; and to Neuza Fians, for the smiles and kisses. Besides, impossible not to mention Edson and Arlete Moreira: my memories of them always make me stronger and give me courage to keep going.
Fig. 1: Political map of Mainland France (without including the overseas regions), according to regions and departments [Source: website Cartograf.fr, retrieved March 2019].
INTRODUCTION, OR WHERE TO BEGIN?

It was early September 2016, my first week living in Paris, France. Autumn had just begun and the Parisians were progressively resuming their normal activities after their summer holidays as, on a Friday afternoon, I took the RER – the intercity train – with two local Esperantists. Pascal and Valentin were in their forties and sixties, respectively, and called themselves ‘Esperantists’ because they spoke and supported the constructed language Esperanto. We were heading to Paris’ Northern banlieue, where the Fête de L’Humanité was about to start. This annual three-day festival is aimed at raising money and support for the magazine L’Humanité, founded in 1904 and historically linked to diverse trends of left-wing activism. On the train, Pascal, Valentin and I carried books, leaflets and other materials from the Paris-based Esperanto association SAT-Amikaro to hold a stall to promote Esperanto at the festival. I asked them for more details about how this festival worked, to which Pascal promptly replied, with an ironic smirk: ‘it’s a communist festival’. Valentin laughed and tried to give me a more elaborate explanation:

No, it’s not a communist festival! It’s a festival organised by this magazine, called L’Humanité, and this magazine is considered communist because it used to belong to the Parti communiste français. The purpose of this festival is to raise funds to continue the publication of this magazine. So, there are a lot of communists at this festival, but this is not really a communist event.

As they continued making jokes about the way this festival was labelled as communist, they did not imagine that, a couple of hours later, this same label would be used against the language they were advocating for. Arriving at the festival venue, we greeted the other Esperantist who was to volunteer with us on the stall, and displayed the material we had brought. As soon as Pascal stood in the middle of the corridor to distribute leaflets and attract passers-by, an elderly man approached him

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1 All the names in this thesis are pseudonyms – except in cases of historical figures – in order to preserve the identity of my interlocutors. These pseudonyms are based on the most popular names according to my interlocutors’ nationalities and age.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations refer to linguistic exchanges originally carried out in Esperanto. Even though some of these are direct transcriptions of recorded conversations or semi-structured interviews, most quotations refer to reconstructions of what was said. Thus, direct transcriptions, as well as quotations that were originally in a language other than Esperanto, will be indicated.
and asked, in a conversation carried out in French: ‘what’s it about?’ Pascal started his brief presentation: ‘this is Esperanto, a language created…’ ‘Oh, yes, right… this is that language for communists, right?’ Pascal immediately tried to change his mind by saying that Esperanto used to be supported in communist circles, but that it has also appealed to people from many other profiles and backgrounds. But the elderly man did not really seem to be interested, mumbling ‘ok, ok’ and continuing his walk along the festival pavilion. As Valentin and I followed this encounter at a distance, Pascal looked at us and smirked. This time, however, it was not an ironic and mocking smirk, but one of resignation, expressing his disappointment with the passer-by’s disinterest.

One month later, I met Pascal and Valentin again – this time, not at a festival, but at the headquarters of SAT-Amikaro, in Paris. On Friday evenings, this association holds the babilrondoj, the debate circles, in which Esperantists meet for an informal conversation in Esperanto about specific topics that are decided and announced in advance. After discussing the French elections, nuclear energy, mental health, and language discrimination in previous weeks, this time the debate was more open: each participant should bring a newspaper or magazine article to present and discuss with the others.

Paul, a retired lecturer in Medicine, brought a newspaper article about a recent scholarly research on what motivates people to smoke and to quit smoking. From the article, he argued that human beings always do the opposite of what they should do and, in making ill-considered decisions, they sacrifice important things – their own health included. Subsequently, Gilbert shared with the participants an article that he had received by e-mail from the Union des Fédéralistes Européens. As a member of this association, he often received these newsletters, with contents supporting European Federalism and the strengthening of the European Union. He discussed how the EU had been facing problems due to a weak integration:

I think Europe is totally suitable for federalism, and I actually came across Esperanto and became interested in it because of European federalism. When I first heard about Zamenhof, his history and ideas spoke to me. Were he alive today, he would probably support Federalism!
Gilbert went on saying that Esperanto could even play a role in this federalism, as a language built from European languages that would underplay nationalisms. Other participants of the *babilrondo* did not seem to be equally supportive of federalism. Valentin grumbled something about the EU not being worth the effort: ‘No matter how much we change the EU, it would still be an outcome of capitalism trying to co-opt every social relation into a commercial framework’.

Then, Pascal contributed to the debate with two articles. Both were originally written in Esperanto, published in the Esperanto magazine *Sennacialo* (The Non-National), which is edited by SAT, an association linked to SAT-Amikaro. One of these articles was about the destruction of the Amazon, emphasising how European countries were also responsible for it since they also bought wood from this forest. This article did not elicit reactions among the participants, and he moved on to the second one, about José Mujica, former president of Uruguay. This text argued that Mujica was one of the few contemporary politicians who were legitimately for the minorities and working classes, and this became the focus of the discussion for most of that evening. Due to my Brazilian nationality, Pascal and others participants of the debate were also curious about my perspective on Latin American politics, asking me to compare presidents from that continent. They seemed to be surprised with some of the things I said, and Pascal whined: ‘We don’t hear much about Latin America in the mainstream French media, that’s why we need this kind of debate here!’ Later, he complemented: ‘Without this article about politics in Uruguay, I would know nothing about him [Mujica]’.

While Pascal and Valentin spread the word about Esperanto at a ‘communist festival’ and use this language to discuss politics, also other people engage with Esperanto in different ways, detached from activism. Young Esperanto speakers, for example, frequently use this language online, to talk about video games, travelling, or to learn and practice foreign languages with Esperantists from different language backgrounds. They also often mock the reactions of some non-Esperantists to this language – in this case, not in Esperanto, to engage other audiences. A common way of joking about this takes place precisely through a very youthful tool: internet memes, one of the most popular and fast-spreading tools to transmit ideas online, consisting of humorous posts based on an image or on a comic strip [Figure 2].
Fig. 2: Comic strip in English, made by young Esperantists, joking about some parent’s reactions towards Esperanto language learning [Source: Facebook page Steve the silly and vagabond linguist, retrieved September 2017].

The figure above is one of many versions of this comic strip that became popular on online social media. The images in this comic strip often refer to other practices (usually, video games, nerdy practices or youthful habits that tend to annoy parents), and this specific version, made by young language lovers, in English, refers to studying Esperanto as something parents would, at times, deride or see as pointless.
As this image and the previous vignette illustrate, people from different age brackets learn and use Esperanto for different purposes, ranging from engagements with political causes to language-based games and memes.

Esperanto was originally designed to be a peace-related, nationalism-free, neutral and secular language that would not replace national languages, but instead would be used mostly for international communication. It is assumed to be no one’s first language, as nobody is raised in an Esperanto-speaking neighbourhood or country and people are not normally required to learn it to apply for jobs or to live abroad. Alternatively supported by the bourgeoisie, intellectuals, revolutionaries and left-wing activists since its early days, Esperanto has currently also drawn the attention of young polyglots and of geeks and nerds attracted by non-mainstream intellectual activities. These often come across and study Esperanto through online courses and mobile phone apps and occasionally compare it to literary and Hollywoodian languages such as Tolkien’s Elvish, Star Trek’s Klingon and George R. R. Martin’s Dothraki. In many ways, over time, Esperanto developed a set of cosmopolitan principles and sociabilities linked to it, a widespread speech community, and a language-based social movement. It has also developed a presence at stalls at festivals and on internet memes, from international meetings to local associations, being alternatively seen as a futile hobby, an intellectual game or a language-based critique of the contemporary.

In this research, through an ethnographic approach, I aim to map the ways through which Esperanto speakers and supporters relate to this language and to understand how a community made up of Esperanto speakers and a movement to promote the language can exist and be rendered stable if Esperanto speakers are scattered all over the world and may, at times, not share much besides the language. In order to retrace Esperanto-related practices, I conducted the major component of my fieldwork in France, the country in which Esperanto gained significant momentum in this language’s early days. I focused particularly on Paris, where larger Esperanto associations and networks are located. From these places, I will approach the everyday practices of Esperanto speakers and supporters by following them as they attend Esperanto associations, meetings, congresses, and promotion campaigns, from their attempts to spread the word about the language to instances in which they
simply speak it. I will also look at how they meet fellow speakers and use, articulate and switch languages in these encounters – which, since Esperanto is presumed to be a tool for international communication, should, ideally, include speakers of different mother tongues.

Some of those who know Esperanto but are sceptical about its usefulness think of it as a project that went wrong; as an artificial language that was meant to become universal but ended up abandoned. In this way, Esperanto is understood as an unsuccessful utopian project that ended up confined to the past. Plenty of those who speak and support Esperanto, on the other hand, regard it as a living language that continues to attract people who are looking for an alternative way of communicating; as a language for activists who are committed to causes such as language diversity and language rights, human rights, and international communication beyond borders and without discrimination; as a language that animates a community of people who are, in their majority, committed to such causes. Seen from this standpoint, Esperanto appears as something oriented towards the future. However, between a failed project circumscribed to the past and a future-oriented movement for more egalitarian and fairer communication, what is at stake now? In other words, what is the place of Esperanto in the present, where these notions of past and future seem to be entangled?

How do Esperanto speakers and supporters engage with Esperanto in practice and what leads them to study this language and to push it forward as a cause? How do notions such as ‘success’, ‘hope’, ‘failure’, ‘past’ and ‘future’ feature in the understanding of those who actively use and support Esperanto? By tracing Esperanto speakers’ and supporters’ conceptions and practices regarding internationalism, communication, mobilities, hopes for the future, and political activism, I explore the reasonings that move people to study this language and what they do with it in practice. I also look at how different age groups and generations use Esperanto, seeing it through the lenses of a tool for international travelling, of an intellectual game or of political activism. From these aspects, in the background of this thesis, runs a question on how a speech community that is not geographically bounded and that cannot rely on straightforward intergenerational transmission can be made stable.
In the beginning was the word

It was in the late nineteenth century, through the pen of Lazar Ludwig Zamenhof, in present-day Poland, that a language called Esperanto began to take shape. In an attempt to bring about a rapprochement of peoples all over the world through international communication and mutual understanding, Zamenhof conceived of Esperanto as a regular and rational language. Easier to learn than the already existing languages at that time, Esperanto would be linked to its creator’s pacifist ideals of fraternity, solidarity and world peace. Throughout its history, Esperanto has been widely supported, learned, spoken, forgotten, and learned again, attracting both enthusiastic supporters and enemies. During its 130 years of existence, it has aroused the interest and the backing of people such as Leo Tolstoy, Marshal Tito, Jules Verne, Charles Chaplin and Tivadar Soros, as well as the disavowal of George Orwell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Noam Chomsky. Whatever it is and whatever it is capable of, Esperanto seems to have succeeded in its attempts to continue to attract people’s attention and to gather speakers and supporters, which makes it a phenomenon remarkable in itself.

However, before tracing the uses of Esperanto in various places, times and circumstances, another, more immediate question arises: what kind of language is that? This leads us to a brief outline of some of the features that causes Esperanto to stand out among other human languages.

Often classified as a constructed, international auxiliary language, Esperanto’s phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and semantics draw heavily upon the Indo-European languages spoken in Europe (mostly Romance, Germanic, and Slavic languages). In terms of vocabulary, Zamenhof tried to choose the most international roots for the initial words he formulated for the language – which in

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3 Esperanto as a language has been comprehensively presented, both in descriptive and prescriptive grammars, aimed at linguists and at the general public. For our purposes here, I only describe a few elements, based mainly on Wells (2006).

4 Esperanto’s internationality is often questioned by those who argue that Esperanto is not equidistant from all existing languages (Van Parijs 2011: 40-42) and that its typology is too European – and, 28
practice meant roots that were present in most European languages – so that Esperanto would sound familiar to the majority of speakers of these languages. Its alphabet is based on the Latin script, with some letters having diacritics. Its spelling is phonemic, each letter corresponding to one phoneme and with the stress always on the penultimate syllable. In terms of morphology and syntax, Esperanto is agglutinative, with compound words formed in a head-final order. Words in Esperanto consist of a stem, occasionally with suffixes and prefixes attached to it, followed by a grammatical ending: for instance, -o for nouns and -a for adjectives, a plural ending -j and an accusative case ending -n. Its dominant word order is SVO (subject + verb + object). However, this order is flexible due to the morphological marking of the accusative, which allows its speakers to recognise the constituents irrespective of their order in a sentence.

Unlike natural or ‘ethnic’ languages (Miner 2011) that develop over time as systems of communication by a specific human group, the fundamentals of Esperanto were created by one man. Zamenhof initiated and drafted the language, but it has continuously developed by its growing and diversifying speech community. As highlighted by Angelika, an Esperantist I met at the 101st Universal Congress of Esperanto, in Slovakia, 2016: ‘Esperanto is an interesting phenomenon, isn’t it? Because the language created its population, whereas what usually happens is the opposite: a population creates its language’. This contrast with natural languages is what characterises Esperanto as a constructed or planned language, and is what accounts for its alleged artificiality. However, as in natural languages, Esperanto’s development also produces changes, updates and variations, as its speakers made it into a living language that has evolved from its planned fundamentals.

However lively and natural this language may have become through its regular use, the stability of the Esperanto speech community is continuously called into question due to the ways in which the language is transmitted and taught. Since Esperanto is not locally or customarily spoken anywhere, by any specific geographically bounded people, virtually nobody is required to speak it. Furthermore, intergenerational
transmission cannot be assumed to ensure the continuity of this speech community. There are families that use Esperanto as a home language and transmit it to their children. Some of these children are bilingual or multilingual and have Esperanto as one of their mother tongues, mainly in cases where their parents came from different language backgrounds and met each other through Esperanto. There are also occasions in which the younger generations of a family become interested in Esperanto thanks to the older generations’ involvement with it. However, since these cases are not common, this speech community cannot rely on intergenerational transmission. Moreover, Esperanto is neither acknowledged as an official language nor supported by any government and there is no stable and widespread provision of services or education offered in this language, as Esperanto is rarely taught within the scope of a pedagogic or school authority. Rather than being taught in families, at schools or at language courses, the most frequent way for people to study Esperanto is through self-learning. In this language’s early days, this occurred mostly through language learning materials and books, correspondence courses, and courses by phone. Face-to-face Esperanto courses are also available, usually in Esperanto clubs and associations, but sometimes also in schools and universities. However, the bulk of its speakers still learn this language as autodidacts. More recently, new communication technologies have also enabled the creation of online courses and group discussions. These online tools brought new speakers to this community, but also reinforced Esperanto’s position outside the framework of formal education.

We could argue that, unlike natural languages, Esperanto tends to challenge a crucial trait of the classical definition of ‘social fact’. As Durkheim defines them, such facts consist of ‘manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him’ (1982: 52). Irrespective of the contemporary validity of this definition, it is relevant to note that Durkheim cites languages as a clear example of a social fact: ‘I am not forced to speak French with my compatriots, nor to use the legal currency, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise. If I tried to escape the necessity, my attempt would fail miserably’ (Durkheim 1982: 51). Esperanto, in turn, seems to be outside the realm of coercion. It leads to the establishment of a non-ethnic, non-territorial speech community (Wood 1979), thus people who do not want to learn or
speak it are unlikely to feel some sort of constraint or to have an external, compelling obligation to do so.

Another aspect that sets Esperanto apart as a rather singular language has to do with its relation to spatiality. There is no locality, be it a neighbourhood, city, region or country, in which Esperanto is an official language or a language of regular use. Since, practically, nobody is fully immersed in an Esperanto-speaking environment, there are no native speakers of Esperanto – which touches on linguistic debates about what it means to be a native speaker of a language. Regarding Esperanto, Miner (2011) argues that there is a crucial difference between ‘native speakers’ and ‘speakers-from-birth’. Following his formalist approach (2011: 28), there are people who learn Esperanto as a language-from-birth, using it with their parents at home. Yet this is different from being a native speaker, which would mean, in turn, that one learned this language by receiving and using it continuously within a wider speech community during one’s early childhood. If some children only speak Esperanto with their parents and siblings, they are more likely to repeat the mannerisms, grammar mistakes, and expressions and idioms coming from their close relatives.

Native speakers occupy a prestigious position in formal language theory in linguistics (Chomsky 2006). Unlike people who learn a language later in life, native speakers unconsciously develop certain cognitive systems that characterise their knowledge of the language, and this unconscious feature accounts for their norm-providing use of the language (Chomsky 2006: 23-25, Miner 2011). The same does not apply to speakers-from-birth, which, according to Miner, makes Esperanto linguistics impossible. In a parallel approach, drawing upon the Esperanto word *denaskulo*, Fiedler (2006, 2012) agrees that the status of someone who speaks Esperanto from birth cannot be equated with the status of a native speaker of an ethnic language and, furthermore, that the linguistic competence of *denaskuloj* does not decide on the standard of the language. However, in her view, this does not invalidate Esperanto linguistics, as the study of children speaking it can be useful to explore linguistic phenomena such as baby-talk, onomatopoeia and euphemisms (2012: 75-76). Esperanto may not be an object of study available for formal linguists,

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5 The word *denaskuloj* is made of the following elements (as described by Fiedler 2012: 79, footnote 1): de ‘from’, nask ‘birth’, ul ‘person’, o ‘noun’, and j ‘plural’.
but this does not preclude the possibility of studying this speech community and its language use from other theoretical perspectives.

As this language does not rely on having native speakers and as the Esperanto speech community is not territorialised anywhere in the world, there is a lack of precision about how many people speak Esperanto. This speech community is said to count on two million L2 speakers – meaning those who have Esperanto as a second language – which places Esperanto as the most widespread international auxiliary language. This is the figure most often repeated by Esperantists since 1989, the year when Culbert disclosed the results of his imprecise and loose survey on the number of Esperanto speakers in the world in a letter to Wolff (Culbert 1989). The same number was repeated more recently, in an equally vague survey, this time based on the online use of Esperanto (Wandel 2015). Some issues prevent us from obtaining reliable figures on the number of Esperanto speakers. Firstly, national surveys, when they include questions about language background, usually focus on mother tongues, rather than on languages learned throughout one’s life. Secondly, not all of those who learn the language become members of Esperanto associations, go to international meetings, join the Esperanto community or movement, or use the language regularly; and thirdly, not all of those who start studying the language are proficient enough or willing to use it to communicate with fellow Esperanto speakers. We cannot easily confirm this figure of two million speakers, but the fact that Esperantists usually mention it to justify the strength of this language is an ethnographic finding in itself.

It is also worth noting that, as a constructed language, Esperanto goes against the theoretical principle of the priority of spoken language over the written one. As argued by Lyons (1968: 38-39), there has never been any known human group lacking the capacity for speech. At the same time, many languages have never been associated with a writing system prior to encountering with missionaries and linguists, who proposed written forms for these languages. The contrasting feature of Esperanto in this regard is that it was first designed in written form.

6 Sign languages are excluded from this principle.
To sum up, in Esperanto’s case – as in the case of other international auxiliary languages, as we will discuss in Chapter 1 – the language came before its speech community, has no coercive power over groups of people, was first developed in written form, and does not rely on norm-providing native speakers. Esperanto was made for everyone but does not belong to anyone, i.e. it is not the language of any ethnic or national group, and no human group feels any immediate need or constraint to speak it. Esperanto is no one’s language and, therefore, can be anyone’s – which does not mean it will be everyone’s language in practice. Most importantly, apart from the language itself, Esperanto became, as many of its supporters argue, ‘more than a language’, evolving as a speech community, a set of cosmopolitan principles and sociabilities, and a language-based social movement that moves in different directions. Against this background, how can this language yield such assemblages and sociabilities, and how do these take shape in practice?

**Encounters: on community, movement and mediation**

One can travel, play certain games, cultivate hobbies, read literature or enact one’s political convictions on one’s own. However, using a language in all its glory requires both receptive and productive skills, which turns any fully-fledged engagement with verbal communication into a collective endeavour. In other words, the persistence of Esperanto is also steeped in the existence of an Esperanto speech community, wherein fellow speakers can use the language and communicate fully. Although this speech community is not congruent with a nation-state or a geographically bounded group, its members do recognise themselves as part of this community and share ‘a mutually intelligible symbolic and ideological communicative system’ (Morgan 2004: 3). Despite the unboundedness and spatio-temporal instability of this community –
which we will discuss at depth in the chapters to come – the abovementioned features characterise it as a community in both socio-anthropological and linguistic terms.

Apart from sharing knowledge and meanings derived from and related to this language use, Esperanto speakers share two other crucial features. First, they choose to speak this language of their own will, instead of devoting time to other activities or languages. Second, they are either already interested or are likely to develop an interest in international communication once they join this community – which is what makes the learning of this language meaningful for many. This idea of the Esperanto community as a collective that identifies as a social grouping neither primarily on the basis of shared identity characteristics (such as gender, social class, ethnicity or age) nor of geographically bounded, face-to-face co-presence is what brings Esperantists close to the definition of ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991; Eckert 2006). Esperanto speakers come (not necessarily physically) together by virtue of their practice of the language and of the values and interests they share through this. In this regard, their gatherings can be compared to those of membership-based communities such as bowling teams, book clubs and church congregations, as they are made up of people sharing an interest, task or hobby and practising it together (Gobbo Forthcoming). There are also practices derived from Esperanto that bring more diversity to this community, leading to the establishment of groups of Esperantist mathematicians, Esperantist left-wing activists and Esperantist poets. Drawing upon common practices, such groups develop idiomatic expressions and varieties of spoken and written registers of the language among themselves. However, the core practice that characterises Esperantists as members of a community of practice is precisely the practice of the language. Thus, as emphasised by Eckert (2006: 685), combining the ‘speech community’ and the ‘community of practice’ approaches enables us to explore community-building and language use from multiple perspectives. This allows for considerations of how language variation in Esperanto can be perceived in contiguous places (for instance, between speakers from different age groups attending the same gathering at an Esperanto association in Paris), but also how it plays out according to the speakers’
mother tongue, to allegiance to specific Esperanto associations and movements, and to their distinct engagements with Esperanto.

Having clarified some analytical concepts, such as speech community and community of practice, let me also outline here some key emic categories. Esperanto speakers and supporters often refer to the Esperanto community as Esperantujo or Esperantio. In mobilising these categories, they refer to the common language that helps establish them as a community, but also to the set of cosmopolitan principles and sociabilities that they normally attribute to the ideal-typical Esperantist. These principles may include the valorisation of international communication; openness to the world that encompasses an appreciation of diversity in terms of cultures, languages and nationalities; pursuit of alternatives in terms of communication; communication on an equal footing, in which everyone is potentially on a level playing field; usually an enjoyment of international travel; kindness and hospitality deriving from an enhanced drive to meet and welcome the (cultural, national, linguistic) Other. These are among the stereotypical and romanticised traits that many Esperantists attribute to fellow members of Esperantujo. Through this language and through joining Esperantujo, the Other at stake here – who is preferably from a different nationality, culture and speaking a different mother tongue – partially becomes a peer, a fellow Esperantist, who is expected to share a cosmopolitan passion for multiculturalism, multilingualism and internationalism by being part of this community, which is international and diverse in its own right.

At this point, another previously mentioned term catches our attention: Esperantist. If those who speak French or Portuguese are French or Portuguese speakers, why do people say ‘Esperantist’, rather than simply ‘Esperanto speaker’? It is also surprising to see the suffix ‘ist’ in ‘Esperantist’ if we think of words such as Africanist, communist or journalist, in which ‘ist’ denotes a field of expertise, an affiliation to a political doctrine or an occupation. Nonetheless, there is a distinction between Esperanto-parolanto (Esperanto speaker) and esperantisto (Esperantist) to be considered. The word esperantisto was first formalised in the Declaration of Boulogne (Zamenhof 1905), which was issued following the First Universal Congress of Esperanto, in Boulogne-sur-mer, 1905:

7 I will discuss these terms and their translations in detail in Chapter 1.
An Esperantist is a person who knows and uses the language Esperanto with complete exactness, for whatever aim he uses it for. Membership in an active Esperantist social circle or organisation is recommended for all Esperantists, but is not obligatory.

Even though Esperantists often mention this definition, it does not hold in practice. In Esperanto, esperantisto is an umbrella term commonly used to refer to both Esperantists and Esperanto speakers, and is only occasionally distinguished from Esperanto-parolanto. Among my interlocutors, however, a distinction was more commonly drawn, in French, between espérantiste and espérantophone, following from the use of the suffix -phone in French, in words such as francophone or anglophone. Drawing upon this emic differentiation, throughout this thesis I will use ‘Esperanto speaker’ to characterise those who are learning or who can speak this language, regardless of fluency, but who do not use Esperanto to engage with fellow speakers on a regular basis or in a more meaningful way and who do not claim to participate in Esperantujo. ‘Esperantists’, in contrast, will designate those who speak it regularly or, alternatively, who support Esperanto, join the Esperanto movement and Esperanto associations as activists, volunteers and members, and who participate in Esperantujo. The more one uses the language and becomes involved with Esperantujo, the more one is seen as an aktiva esperantisto (active Esperantist) – since, regardless of the number of speakers of Esperanto, what matters for the liveliness of the community is the presence and constant engagement of its already existing speakers. In short, ethnographically speaking, Esperantists are those who engage more significantly with Esperanto, which is often done either through participation in the community or activism for the movement – or both.

This leads us to reflect on the Esperanto-movado, the Esperanto movement. Here Esperanto is conveyed as a proposed solution to address a certain situation of strain (Forster 1982: 5-7). This movement is made up of those Esperantists who are committed to maintaining and/or spreading the use and the reach of the Esperanto language, which transforms it into a political cause to be advanced. Thus, just as is the case with minority languages – as Urla (1988: 382-385; 1993) discusses in the case of Basque – more than the skills and ability to use the language, what really matters to the Esperanto community is the effective use of the language. In this sense, the Esperanto movement is also preoccupied with encouraging the regular use
of the language, seeking to transform *espérantophones* into *espérantistes* or, in other words, *esperantistoj* into *aktivaj esperantistoj*.

Promoting Esperanto without imposing it would be a way to linguistically address situations of strain linked to the fight for language rights, for more inclusive and fairer international communication, and against language imperialism. Nevertheless, if this movement aims at maintaining and advancing Esperanto, it often blends with the enactments of Esperantujo, in a feedback loop whereby the community and the movement feed each other. For our purposes here, the major difference lies in the fact that the movement, as ethnographically defined, is perceived as being more institutionalised. In other words, it draws upon membership in Esperanto associations and upon promoting and advertising this language at stalls at fairs and events, and distributing leaflets and spreading the word about it – which is not something that every member of Esperantujo would be inclined to do.

Thinking about how people engage with Esperanto, let us go back to the emic stereotypical model of the ordinary Esperantist. An ideal-typical Esperantist learns an international auxiliary language because they want to get in touch with people from other language backgrounds in an alternative way, without resorting to one of their mother tongues, thus avoiding hierarchies in terms of language proficiency. If a Brazilian and an Italian are speaking in English, English works for them as a neutral language, as it is neither of their mother tongues. However, when an Englishman joins the conversation, English is not neutral anymore, since one of the participants has an advantage in this interaction, feeling at home using their own mother tongue. Since Esperanto is no one’s language, virtually everyone who speaks it has to learn it as a second language, which softens the link between language nativeness, language proficiency and power, and which partially levels out the uneven playing field in which international communication normally takes place. Moreover, when a native speaker of Portuguese learns French, they do not acquire the same status as a native speaker of French, as French is someone else’s language, not theirs. In contrast, anyone can potentially equally achieve the status of Esperantist and, as international auxiliary languages like Esperanto are not linked to national or ethnic groups, anyone can join and withdraw from Esperantujo at any time.
Nonetheless, for the language to make sense in practice, ideal-typical Esperantists must encounter people from other language backgrounds who also speak Esperanto. As my interlocutors in France frequently stressed, there is no point in speaking an international auxiliary language in one’s home country or neighbourhood, in which one could as well be using one’s mother tongue. Hence, travelling and communicating beyond borders become the most evident options to make Esperantujo real. In effect, Esperanto’s very raison d’être lies in its internationality and unboundedness, which are made concrete on the occasions in which fellow Esperantists from diverse language backgrounds gather. Esperantists are everywhere and nowhere, and bringing Esperantujo into fully-fledged existence entails creating contexts in which this language can be used in meaningful ways. This is made possible by international Esperanto meetings such as congresses, summer courses, music festivals and tours and excursions.

In these international Esperanto-mediated settings, Esperanto is used as a ‘pivot language’ (Gazzola 2006: 414-415): it works as a mediator between people who speak different mother tongues. And here we reach a point that will prove crucial for this research: the idea of mediation. First designed as a peace-building tool that would help people overcome language barriers of all sorts, both physical and in terms of mutual (mis)understandings, Esperanto was intended to act as a mediator in international communication since its early days. From Zamenhof’s nineteenth century scenario – in which each language was perceived as connected to a specific national group – overcoming language frontiers also meant obviating segregation, discrimination, nationalisms and xenophobia, in a humanist approach that, as I will show in Chapter 2, mediates between people irrespective of their backgrounds and belongings. One could argue that any language is a mediator, which is true. Esperanto, however, is embedded in a set of cosmopolitan ideals and principles whereby mediation becomes essential to Esperantujo, acquiring multiple forms.

The category ‘mediation’ is often thought of in terms of tension management and conflict resolution. In cases of child custody disputes, marital conflicts, peacekeeping, and civil wars, a mediator is a third party who facilitates interactions between two or more disputants. In these cases, the third party has some control over the mediation process, but no power to prescribe agreements or outcomes (Wall and
Dunne 2012: 217-221). In this use of the word, mediation differs from litigation: in the latter, the third party is a judge, rather than a mediator, and decides the outcomes of the dispute. Such conceptualisation of mediation is not limited to Western settings. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 162-177) also used this term to describe the role of the leopard-skin chief and the elders in settling disputes among the Nuer. The leopard-skin chiefs are considered to be especially prestigious to mediate conflicts because of their religious powers, and their not belonging to the system of dominant lineages makes them more suitable to mediate between the parties involved. Since these chiefs are traditional mediators, their verdict would not imply on a loss of prestige for the losing party in the dispute.

Another use of mediation is recurrent in media anthropology. As Boyer (2012) argues, the operation of communicational media is intertwined with broader socio-political processes of ‘social mediation’ – which he defines as ‘social transaction in its broadest sense of the movement of images, discourse, persons and things’ (2012: 383). Along these lines, if mediation is at the heart of the study of communicational media – which includes, for instance, print, television, radio and the internet – media anthropology ends up becoming the study of anything that mediates. In other words, as Boyer argues, it becomes the anthropology of anything, or simply anthropology, in its broadest sense.

If peace-building, negotiations and communicational media are widely based on mediation practices, institutions and technologies, this is also the case for international, intercultural, interpersonal communication. In the case of Esperanto, mediation often takes the shape of ‘bridging’ – which is the category evoked by Esperantists when referring to Esperanto as a ponta lingvo (bridge language). To bridge between people with different mother tongues through an international auxiliary language, to bridge between people of different nationalities through a cosmopolitan outlook that connects them beyond and by means of their differences. From persons to peoples and from languages to nationalities, Esperanto was conceived of as a mediator that would both enable communication – like any other language – and promote meeting points; settings in which people from different backgrounds would feel equally welcome. This is one of the hallmarks that, as Esperantists argue, distinguish it from other languages.
‘Mediator’ is also a central category in Latour’s actor-network theory (2005). Latour suggests a useful distinction between ‘mediators’ and ‘intermediaries’, according to which the former would consist of humans and non-humans that ‘transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’ (2005: 39). In contrast, intermediaries would transport meanings and forces without transformation. Latour gives the example of a computer: a properly functioning one would not affect our work, and the letters we type in its keyboard would appear in its screen, as we expect. In this case, both the computer and its keyboard would be intermediaries that simply carry our message from our fingers to the screen. However, if the computer breaks down and we lose an important document we were typing, then it becomes a dreadful mediator, that will transform our workday in an unpredicted way (Latour 2005: 39).

Thinking about communication through a dialogue with Latour’s concept of mediation yields an outlook on languages not as simple codes responsible for carrying messages. Rather, languages can act as mediators that also transform, distort and modify the messages they carry and that, therefore, mediate between those who exchange messages. In Esperanto’s case, communication is widely rooted in translation, involving the several mother tongues of all of those speak Esperanto and who read and write in the language (Burghelea 2018). Thereby, in order to create a fully-fledged Esperanto-speaking setting, all the written and spoken communication has to be translated from the Esperantists’ mother tongues and working languages into Esperanto, enabling the latter to play a mediating role between its speakers from this point onwards.

Nonetheless, even though this work of translation also transforms, distorts and modifies the messages at stake, Esperanto’s mediating role is not limited to translation. Due to being backed by a set of cosmopolitan principles, Esperanto is also linked to an idea of openness to people from different national backgrounds, which means that Esperanto also connects people and texts that would otherwise never be brought together. Recalling the discussion on mediation and litigation, Esperanto (as well as languages in general) does not act as a judge and does not define the outcomes of a conversation – but its role cannot go unnoticed either. Considering Esperanto as a mediator enables us to foreground how Esperantists
perceive this language in terms of doing something that other languages do not do in the same way for them: while speaking French would enable two people to communicate with each other, Esperanto would actively encourage them to take the initiative to communicate with each other. Thus, placing mediation at the core of this analysis calls our attention to the ways Esperanto is seen as actively mediating and establishing networks of contacts, rather than acting as a mere code of communication responsible for carrying messages.

Just as Esperanto mediates between people from different nationalities and mother tongues, its speakers usually also rely on settings and communication technologies through which and whereby they use the language. These include Esperanto associations, international Esperanto events and meetings, postal services through which Esperantists exchange letters and postcards with fellow speakers (mostly abroad), the internet, blogs and forums, online social networks and their Esperanto-related communities and groups, and several others. Social media, Esperanto associations and congresses, postcards and the like partly do what the language does in terms of mediation, and Esperantists regularly mobilise these mediators in order to reach out and make full use of the language. Without Esperanto, communication technologies such as the internet and postal services, as well as settings such as associations and meetings, would still exist, but they would not be used to mediate between people and this particular language. In this way, these mediators create conditions for Esperanto speakers to learn this language and use it regularly.

Hence, Esperanto is the major mediator that allows for mobilising particular settings and communication technologies in certain ways so that Esperantujo can come into existence. In formulating mediation along these lines, even though actor-network theory’s concept of mediation is relevant for this analysis, I am not following Latour’s suggestion of keeping the social flat. As he illustrates it:

For example the traffic control room for Paris buses does indeed dominate the multiplicity of buses, but it would not know how to constitute a structure ‘above’ the interactions of the bus drivers. It is added on to those interactions. The old difference of levels comes merely from overlooking the material connections that permit one place to be linked to others and from belief in purely face-to-face interactions (Latour 1996: 240).
This is not the case with Esperanto. As a major mediator, this language is crucial to building networks. In addition, the additional mediators listed above draw upon the language to act as hubs that enable and bring together many connections in the making of the network-like Esperantujo, also connecting Esperanto speakers to the language. In considering mediation in this way, I am not imposing a fixed structure to Esperantujo nor saying that every Esperanto-mediated connection relies on specific mediators beyond the language. However, there are features of Esperanto and its community that do not fall into the framework of the actor-network paradigm. Keeping the social flat and eliminating what is ‘above’ and ‘below’, as Latour proposes (2005: 165-172), would prevent us from seeing that there are things beyond and behind this language, such as a set of cosmopolitan principles, a speech community, a social movement, and power relations. Likewise, there are connections perceived by Esperantists as hubs or major nodes in these networks – such as Esperanto associations and Facebook pages – and there is, above all, Esperanto as a language, which both mediates and makes sense of a certain use of these other mediators. Flattening Esperantujo would mean losing sight of these dimensions and underplaying the importance given by the interlocutors themselves to these mediators.

Additionally, in order for Esperanto to mediate and for Esperantujo to be brought into existence by the connections that constitute it, there must be people, places and things to be connected – and to be traced by the ethnographer. Here, communication becomes pivotal again: international, intercultural, interpersonal, and verbal communication creates the connections that activate Esperantujo, in a feedback loop whereby communication is what motivates people to learn Esperanto and, through their engagements with it, communicating internationally and alternatively gains importance in their practices as Esperantists. In what follows, what is communicated – and, occasionally, miscommunicated – among Esperantists and Esperanto speakers and about Esperanto, either in Esperanto or in other languages, will occupy a prominent place in this study.
Babbling some initial questions and navigating the field

Just like human beings babble before beginning to construct recognisable words, anthropologists also ask basic questions before gaining a deeper understanding of the muddy terrain into which they are about to step. The same happened to me in my first encounter with Esperanto, in 2008. When a friend, who could speak the language fluently, donated part of her collection of Esperanto books to me, I thought I could try learning the language, at least enough to be able to read those books. The following year, I decided to enrol on a free language course at an Esperanto association next to my university campus. After a year spending two hours a week in a tiny and eternally hot office in downtown Rio de Janeiro and meeting around thirty people who were also interested in learning and practising Esperanto, what grabbed my attention was not the grammar, vocabulary or the pronunciation, but the way people engaged with it. For most of them, Esperanto was more than a language: it formed a community, of which we were part, and a movement, made up of those who aspired to the continuous use and to the spread of the language. In becoming familiar with the specific vocabulary of the Esperanto community and movement – with words like *samideano*, *Homaranismo* and *Finvenkismo* (to be discussed in later chapters) – I learned that engaging with Esperanto could mean going beyond the mere process of learning a language. My early interest began to take the form of initial research questions. What does Esperanto mean and what can it do for these people gathered in this tiny office in Rio de Janeiro city centre? What is the point of learning a language that not many people speak? Why would someone study an international language if they speak it only among people who share the same mother tongue?

From these initial questions and bringing together my interest in social anthropology and my curiosity about Esperanto, I embarked on a quest for answers. One of my foci was the question ‘what is the point?’ Just like the ‘archaic societies’ studied by Clastres, Esperantists are sometimes ‘classed negatively, under the heading of lack’ (Clastres 1989: 190): a speech community without many speakers, formed around a language that is not necessary for any communicative purpose, that has no history,
that is not officially adopted or widely spoken anywhere, and not intrinsically attached to any nation, culture or people. In thinking of Esperanto’s seeming futility when trying to see the point of learning it, we are led to focus on the features that Esperanto lacks when compared to other languages and other speech communities – thereby emphasising absences, rather than particularities, and deeming Esperanto to be a minor and futile endeavour. This view is certainly not shared by Esperantists, but is commonplace among some of those who do not sympathise much with this language, as we saw in Pascal’s attempt to promote Esperanto at the Fête de L’Humanité in Paris. This encouraged me to think about how Esperantists reconcile their enthusiasm for their language use with some non-Esperantists’ scepticism about its usefulness. These issues only made this topic even more enticing to me: after all, what if the Esperanto movement does not manage to convince other people and fails to secure the endurance of this community? What if these Esperantists in this office in Rio de Janeiro decide that they no longer want to study Esperanto? What if this language dies out? These naïve early questions did not seem to be the right ones to ask, but they pushed me forward in this quest.

Aside from the significant bibliography on linguistic issues and original and translated literature, Esperanto has also been studied through the lenses and methods of the social sciences. Among the few book-length studies on Esperanto targeting its community and movement, we could identify five major monographs, written mostly from historical and sociological standpoints. Based on archival research, statistical surveys and short-term fieldwork, Forster (1982) provides a historical outline of the Esperanto movement and community, both worldwide and in the United Kingdom, where his research was concentrated. When drawing a profile of Esperantists, he looks at the composition of Esperantujo in terms of social class, gender and occupation, the ways in which many Esperantists also engage with other social movements, and how Esperanto may both converge and contrast with political causes linked to neoliberalism or socialism. On an issue quite recurrent in my own study, Forster also analyses how Esperantists are sometimes perceived by the wider society as ‘cranks’. Rašić (1994), in turn, approaches the Esperanto movement, community and ‘culture’, mostly in European countries, through surveys and statistical data collected by associations, by himself and by previous academic and non-academic
researchers, in an attempt to provide a general picture of Esperantujo. Aiming at a history of ideas on Esperanto and drawing his data mainly from members of Esperanto associations, Rašić analyses how Esperantists address the ideals behind the language, how they link it with other political and religious convictions, and how they perceive neologisms and possible changes to language norms in Esperanto. Of note here for the discussions to follow are his considerations on how Esperantujo is numerically constituted by two age groups: young students and older pensioners.

Bringing together history and sociology in very productive ways, Garvía (2015) focuses on the connections between world history and the development of Esperanto. He shows how Esperanto was a major contender in the ‘battle of artificial languages’ that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when language construction and international languages gained momentum in the northern hemisphere. Furthermore, Garvía explores the current situation of Esperanto and its speakers, outlining profiles of those whose support for the language arises from political, professional and religious interests. Through a comprehensive historiography of the place of Esperanto in Europe throughout the twentieth century, Lins (2016, 2017) describes in detail how the language was alternatively associated with Jews, intellectuals, petty bourgeois and communists. Occasionally embraced by the Soviet Union as an advocate for the internationalisation of communism and occasionally regarded as an enemy of the state, Esperanto figures in his analysis as a language perceived as dangerous, at the time when its speakers were persecuted by totalitarian regimes on the European continent. Finally, Schor (2016) blends historical data and ethnographic-like descriptions to draw a picture of her seven-year experience in Esperantujo. Schor builds upon her international trips and the Esperanto summer courses and congresses she attended as a way of sketching what Esperantujo looks like in practice, but without carrying out long-term fieldwork with the same group of interlocutors.

Most of these studies of the Esperanto community and movement emphasise historical elements, foregrounding how Esperanto in its current form came into being, occasionally anticipating further developments and considering the current Esperantujo as a token to understand its past. Those analyses that use surveys and statistics, on the other hand, tend to produce a profile of the Esperantists of their time.
and to explore a more general picture of the community. Due to their foci, these studies tend to give less attention to the particularities and individualities at stake. Against this background, I aim to fill an ethnographic gap in this literature by offering an approach that is different in three ways. Firstly, in its temporal reach. Rather than outlining a detailed historiography and anticipating the future of Esperanto, I propose a study of current Esperantists, who are situated in time but not determined by the past. Secondly, in its spatial dimension. By concentrating the bulk of my fieldwork in Paris, France, I managed to regularly follow the engagements of Esperantists and Esperanto speakers with Esperanto and beyond, which allowed me to get to know the same people better and to have a deeper grasp of how they situate this language within other aspects of their daily lives. Thirdly, in its methodological approach, which combined long-term participant observation with archival research (with documents and archives from Esperantists’ private collections, from the associations where I conducted fieldwork, and those available online) and interviews. The features that characterise this research are typical of long-term ethnography – which is precisely what had not been foregrounded by previous research and which characterises this as the first long-term study of the Esperanto community and movement focused on participant observation.

A note on concentrating on the present becomes imperative here. Through a presentist approach, as proposed by Ringel (2012, 2016), I focus on concrete, present-day ethnographic details, highlighting the present itself, rather than regarding it as a necessary outcome of the past. However, in being less radical than Ringel (2016: 391-392) – and, in my view, more ethnographic (see Chapter 4) – I resort to the past and to the future to situate the analysis where necessary, and especially, when the narratives of Esperantists bring these reckonings of time into the present. In this vein, when talking about narratives, expectations, hope and despair, I am not comparing past, present and future, but presenting my interlocutors’ memories, views and perspectives on these temporalities – that is, on reckonings and claims regarding the past and origin of Esperanto and of practices related to it, as well as its potential prospects and futures. Moreover, when I discuss how young Esperanto speakers in Paris use the language online and through less institutionalised sociability networks, whereas older speakers use it mostly within the framework of Esperanto associations
(Chapters 3 and 4), the argument I put forward is not a historical, but a generational one. Considering Esperanto-related practices from the vantage point of a generational lifetime (Jordheim 2018), I do not claim that Esperantujo is moving from one set of practices to another. Instead, I use a generational approach to show how these distinct and contrasting practices take place simultaneously, among different generations that share the same present-day lifetime.

**Researching in La République**

The decision to carry out the bulk of my fieldwork in France was stirred, among other things, by time – a historical background, in this case. For historical reasons, France has been a beacon for the international Esperanto community and movement since the early decades of the language. In France, Esperanto managed to attract the interest of people from various social backgrounds, social classes, education levels, occupations and, what is more, political convictions. France is particularly well-known among Esperantists for hosting intriguing politically-oriented collaborations and controversies, as both the petty bourgeois and left-wing activists embraced Esperanto equally in this country in the early twentieth century – eventually arguing over which political orientation would be associated with the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto. Vestiges of these long-standing issues remain to date, as political issues constantly arise among the ‘neutral’ and ‘left-wing’ orientations of Esperantists in France, which makes the French enactments of Esperantujo especially fertile grounds for the study of political engagements.

In addition to the particularities of the French enactments of Esperantujo, which I will present in detail in Chapter 1, France also provides us with a fascinating terrain when it comes to language diversity and language policies. Languages take centre stage in how the local, the national and the global are connected and enacted in the country. Regional languages such as Basque, Occitan, Breton and Corse, among others (see Marcellesi 1975 and McDonald 1989), are the driving force behind French regionalisms, where the defence of such languages entails the defence of
regional cultures, traditions and practices. Since the sixteenth century, but notably during the Third Republic – when French nationalism was constituted and La République was reinforced – the teaching of regional languages and the preservation of regional traditions were discouraged. Over history, the French government invested in homogenising language policies by emphasising French monolingualism as a way of creating a national unity (Escudé 2013). These national language policies are in accordance with recurrent French discourses that accentuate the integrative potential of French, conveying the idea that the national language would also help integrate immigrants in French territory (Grillo 1985).

The 1970s saw a rise of regionalisms in France. With the development of a moral unity of language, people and culture in the country, minority regional language activism gained strength with the support of regionalist political movements in places like Corsica, Bretagne and the Basque Country. Regarding the Corsican case, for instance, Corsican language activists were highly influenced by the wider European political ideology of language, which is based on the assumption that there is a congruence of cultural and linguistic boundaries. Thus, in order to call for political autonomy, they attempted to reinforce the teaching and use of Corsican language to evince the existence of a distinct ‘Corsican people’ (Jaffe 1996: 817-819; 1999: Chapter 4). Just as Frenchness and Corsicaness were delimited by a linguistic component, the Breton movement also placed the Breton language at its core:

> You may learn Breton dances (in a Cercle celtique) or blow up the palace of Versailles (like the FLB [Breton Liberation Front]) and call yourself part of the Breton movement; you will not always be taken seriously, however, by those who now dominate the movement, if you do not speak, or at least seriously aspire to speak, Breton (McDonald 1989: 87).

This grammar of recognition became manifest with bilingual signs for town names and more financial provisions for teaching regional languages in public schools (Candea, 2010: 121 and passim; 2011: 309). Currently, even though the recognition of regional languages is still ongoing, the teaching of foreign languages at French schools pushes the regional ones into the background. This tension reinforces a hierarchy whereby languages that are more widespread come first and regional languages tend to be relegated to the private domain, as less important communication systems, which fuels a conflict between regional and foreign
languages (Escudé 2013: 348-350; for an illustration of how Breton and English are seen as competitors regarding language learning at schools, see McDonald 1989: 93-94).

The same centrality of language applies on the global scale, particularly regarding France-led colonial and postcolonial relations. Whereas the British colonial project was founded upon the political and economic axis that constituted the Commonwealth, French colonisation relied more heavily on forging cultural and linguistic ties, through the establishment of the *francophonie* (Baneth-Nouailhetas 2010: 76-78). These cultural and linguistic ties remained central to the relations that France maintained with its former colonies afterwards:

> The cultural and utopic fraternity enshrined, in the moment of the decolonisation, in the notion of ‘Francophonie’ is, therefore, directly linked to the conception of the universal qualities of the values and political ideals of the French Republic, conveyed by its language (Baneth-Nouailhetas 2010: 77).

Put differently, languages represent a crucial feature in the ways that France, through its political institutions, relates to diversity, as views on cultural diversity are closely associated with language diversity. If languages can set peoples apart – in the case of regional languages challenging the French national unity – they can also bring peoples together – as with the *Francophonie*. Within this scenario, the population also becomes involved with languages, which is manifested, for instance, by associations and social movements that promote and teach regional languages or that fight against the growing influence of English over the French language.

Unsurprisingly, Esperanto and Esperantists also find their place within these language dynamics. In Bretagne, in the northwest of France, several of the most active Esperantists are also Breton speakers and supporters, and connect their activism for their regional minority language with activism for an international auxiliary language. A similar scenario can be found in the south of France, notably in the Occitanie region, where many local Esperantists came across this language through activism for the Occitan language. This region is also prominent among Esperantists for its proximity with the Spanish border, which provides for significant

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8 The *francophonie* (with lowercase ‘f’) was later formalised as the *Francophonie*, or the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*.
solidarity among Occitan-speaking and Catalan-speaking Esperantists, who work together in and through Esperanto to raise awareness of their regional minority languages and their language activism. In Île-de-France, even though discourses about regional languages being repressed by the power and supremacy of French are not equally present, Paris-based Esperantists also draw their language ideologies and strategies from an opposition between French and English. Just as regional language movements argue that the historical dominance of French has affected and undermined the regular use of languages such as Occitan and Breton, Esperantists in Paris (particularly the elderly ones) resort to the argument that English is being imposed on French through the growing borrowing of vocabulary from the former into the latter and the increasing presence of English in France (with, for instance, courses at French universities being offered in English and the use of the English in speeches of French politicians in the multilingual European Parliament). In response to this, some Esperantists in Paris regard Esperanto as a tool to raise debates about language supremacy, showing how English is not an international language, but a national language transposed to the global level, so that supporting Esperanto would constitute a step towards the defence of French in the international scenario.

By concentrating my research among Esperantists in France, I intend to shed light on some aspects of Esperanto as a community and movement, in order to advance debates on political anthropology, globalisation, internationalism, travelling, circulation and mobility, interlinguistics, civic engagements in France, social movements, and time and temporality. I aim to contribute to approaches to cosmopolitanism in practice, through focusing on a cosmopolitan project that argues alternatively for humanism, non-nationalism and internationalism, offering a hands-on take on such topics – which are often discussed theoretically in terms of philosophy, ethics, and epistemology. In this respect, France provides a setting in which these research questions resonate with national debates on politics and languages, creating an environment that is fruitful for both my research purposes and for Esperanto.

In looking at how Esperanto speakers and Esperantists, mostly those based in Paris, understand the potentialities and contingencies of practices related to the language and the project they support, my first set of questions considers how to make sense of
this language learning process. After all, once one learns Esperanto, how does one find or create a context in which to speak it? How does this language act as a mediator and what does it mean to speak and support it? What kind of information is conveyed in this language? From these initial questions, I move to the set of ideas behind the language: are Esperantists necessarily left-wing? Is Esperanto a language of cosmopolitanism, inclusion, social justice and equality – if such things can be attached to a language at all? What does it mean to be an Esperantist in practice? How are cosmopolitan principles manifested in Esperanto-related sociabilities and practices? To what extent can Esperanto be a gateway to engagements with other social movements? Meanwhile, other questions, related to the continuity and stability of the Esperanto community and movement, run through the background of this thesis. If the spread of a language seems to be a long-term, future-oriented endeavour, what happens when this project does not seem to take hold? And how can Esperantujo be rendered stable if people’s allegiance to it is utterly voluntary? These are some of the issues that will be explored in the pages that follow.

Overview of chapters

This thesis opens with a chapter that situates Esperanto in time and space. Even though my ethnographic approach will be focused on present-time Esperantists, it is important to outline how this language, community and movement came into being. This historical background is followed by an inquiry into where to find Esperantists, which includes a discussion on positionality and methodology: as asked above, if this language is oriented towards international communication, where do people speak it? How do they make it international if the regular, common practice is to speak it among speakers of the same mother tongue, residents of the same city and members of the same local and national Esperanto associations? Situating Esperanto in space is also a way to find my place and my field as a researcher. The second chapter explores one of the most important, concrete enactments of Esperantujo: the annual Universal Congresses of Esperanto. Here, Esperantists from various national backgrounds come together and do what they do better: materialise the cosmopolitan
set of ideas behind the language. During these events, Esperanto emerges as a language that mediates between people and communicates differences in a way that builds an international Esperantujo. This, in turn, is based upon the recognition of the national Other and the irreducibility of diversity, in discourses and practices around nationalism and internationalism.

The third chapter brings us back to France through the question: how can the continuity of Esperantujo be ensured beyond the frame of international Esperanto meetings and when the national Other is no longer present? We then move to more regular, but less international, enactments of this community, following practices and gatherings taking place in an Esperanto association in Paris. I tackle how members of this association perceive Esperanto as a cause to be advanced together with other, left-leaning political causes and social movements. I also look at how association members and activists face the apparent decline of this particular association, regarding it as an index showing that Esperanto has lost its momentum and that young people are no longer interested in this language and in their political causes. This yields reflections on the time of Esperanto, as these Esperantists try to reconcile discourses of Esperanto as something of the past and as something oriented towards the future – a future that sometimes seems too far to be true. The fourth chapter contrasts sharply with the previous one, presenting a set of different actors: the youth. Unlike the perspectives held by association-bound Esperantists, this language may have lost its momentum in some ways, but it still appeals to young people. Rather than being concentrated in associations and around political causes, a significant number of university students, geeks and polyglots learns this language online and holds informal gatherings in various locations across Paris and in online social networks. This brings us to a debate about age groups, generations, communication technologies and circulation, producing a contrast between the associative milieu and occasional, less institutionalised networks of Esperanto speakers.

In the fifth chapter, the perspectives of Esperanto as a language of the past and as a project for the future are brought together and accommodated within present-day practices of Esperantists. Here Esperanto is conveyed as an everyday achievement enabled by a fairer and more equitable communication mediated by the language. In
this sense, questions of what leads people to study this language and, above all, on what roles this language plays in someone’s life show us how Esperanto can make people do things right here and now, irrespective of how successful or stable this language use and community can be. In analysing the engagements of particular Esperantists, we delve into what Esperanto means to them and how its speakers render it useful. Finally, in drawing to a close, this thesis returns to the uncertainty over the continuous use of Esperanto and the instability of Esperantujo, arguing that, rather than a flaw, instability and ephemerality are constitutive elements of this community, without which the use of Esperanto would not be as meaningful to its adherents.

Since Esperanto is not a phenomenon detached from the world, hanging in the air, as we outline the history of Esperanto and the vibrant competition among artificial languages in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we are also drafting some aspects of European history. Likewise, talking about the dynamics in an Esperanto association in Paris entails debating the significance of the associative milieu and its connections with freedom of speech in French history, political and social engagements, social movements and the development of left-wing activism in France. Thus, every topic debated, however small and specific it may seem, unfolds within the many other issues to be approached from the ethnographic data that we will look at. At the end of the day, this thesis is about languages, social movements, the internet, France, nationalism and cosmopolitanism from the perspective of Esperantists and Esperanto speakers – and about the instability and ephemerality that characterise the connections between them all.
‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’
‘That depends a great deal on where you want to get to’, said the Cat.
‘I don’t much care where’, said Alice.
‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go’, said the Cat.
‘…so long as I get somewhere’. Alice added as an explanation.
‘Oh, you’re sure to do that’, said the Cat, ‘if only you walk long enough’.
(Lewis Carroll, from *Alice’s Adventures in the Wonderland* (2003: 54))

If we are to understand what makes someone decide to study Esperanto, first we have
to consider what Esperanto can enabled people to do. This involves looking at the
historical background that led the Esperanto community and movement to be what
they are nowadays. When locating Esperanto in time and space, it is crucial to keep
in mind that its coming into being and its developments are embedded in broader
world history, as global events and settings created conditions for Esperanto to exist,
to resist and to be resisted. The history of constructed languages – for Esperanto is
not the only language that has been constructed – is inseparable from the history of
the ideas and agendas that guide these projects (Yaguello 1984: 24-25; Eco 1995:
336), which will require us to go far beyond Esperanto in our analysis, both
historically and geographically, before we can eventually come back to it.

I do not intend to offer a comprehensive background of Esperanto in terms of history
and cartography here, since this has already been extensively done by many scholars
(such as Couturat and Leau 1903, 1907; Guérard 1921; Courtinat 1964; Forster 1982;
Garví a 2015; Lins 2016, 2017; Schor 2016; Fians 2017a) – not to mention the
biographies of influential Esperantists and pioneers, like Zamenhof (Drezen 1929;
Boulton 1960; Privat 2001; Korzhenkov 2009, among other biographers) and Lanti
(Borsboom 1976). My aim here is simply to outline some of the elements that
constitute Esperanto’s past, as a way to make sense of it and to situate it in the
scenario in which it has developed. Focusing on the principles often attributed and
linked to Esperanto, on the historically constituted diversity of its speakers and
supporters, and on how they use the language mainly through practices of international mobility will, I believe, provide tools to grasp the experiences made possible by Esperanto.

However, locating it in space and time also implies a dislocation, insofar as Esperanto speakers and Esperantists often rely on circulation and traveling as a means to engage with the language and to use it in practice. Exploring and locating Esperanto-related practices does not necessarily fix and stabilise them, but yields a historical-methodological discussion that will allow us to get to where we are trying to go, by followings ideas, people and things along not-so-straight paths.

1.1. A long and winding road

As we saw in the Introduction, the formation of a French national unity involved historical moments in which regional languages were alternatively regarded as supporting diversity through the valorisation of regionalisms or as competing with the French language and values. Just like regionalist and nationalist debates involve languages in France, the same applies to the status of less spoken local languages in the face of the spread of majority languages on a global scale, especially in relation to the growing importance of English in international communication. One area of these long-standing debates on language supremacy also touches on minority language rights and how one can value one’s own language in a world where more and more people are expected to be able to communicate with a broader, international audience. Yet these issues have been at stake from different angles long before discussions on globalisation. Since the myth of the Tower of Babel, the existence of many languages has been seen as an obstacle to communication, and debates on the adoption of a common international code gained momentum during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Eco 1995; Garvía 2015). Along these lines, many propositions were made to cope with language diversity, combining a concern for the preservation of local languages with the adoption of a common language to be used more broadly. In local and regional contexts, some lingue franche and contact
languages were developed, enabling communication between peoples with different mother tongues. However, would such a lingua franca be possible at global level?

In the second half of the nineteenth century, technological advances boosted people’s possibilities for communicating and travelling long distances (Couturat and Leau 1903: vii-x; Eco 1995: 317), which can be illustrated by the popularisation of postal services and the development of means of communication and transportation, such as the telegraph, the telephone and the airplane. Added to the growing perceived need for the exchange of goods and scientific knowledge felt by the ‘civilised nations’ (Couturat and Leau 1903: vii), these advances fuelled debates about the implementation of a common language. In addition, due to the European colonisation of African and Asian countries, the need for communication – as well as European influence – was no longer confined to Europe. As a consequence, intellectuals and traders assumed that any debate on common languages would affect also European colonies and other overseas countries. Thus, what was – and is – at stake is an international auxiliary language, also referred to at the time as a ‘universal language’, to be used worldwide. In this regard, there were numerous proposals to establish a code of communication not to replace local or national languages, but to supplement them for the purposes of international communication.

Some of these proposals were based on the use of an existing modern language as an instrument for communication between speakers of different mother tongues – which corresponds in many ways to the role currently played by English. Since the Second World War, English is considered to have emerged as a de facto world language (Li 2003: 33). Its use has several advantages in instrumental terms, insofar as it is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. However, the use of a national language at the global scale meets strong opposition when faced with the issue of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992; Eco 1995: 333; Li 2003). As languages such as English and French are foreign to many, their worldwide, all-encompassing use is often challenged by the nationalist or anti-imperialist values of those who refrain from using another people’s language for international communication.

As an alternative, other projects favoured the adoption of a classical, extinct language for such a purpose, with Latin and Ancient Greek as the two main candidates. The fact that their vocabularies are relatively international within the
scope of European languages (Kent 1922) facilitated attempts to promote them as prospective means of global communication – alongside, of course, their main advantage: unlike English or French, Latin and Ancient Greek are less subject to nationalist-driven prejudices. Nonetheless, these projects also present clear drawbacks. Apart from the many irregularities and variations in both the written and spoken forms of these languages, the Greek alphabet is different from the more widespread Latin alphabet; and Latin was frequently associated with the Catholic Church (Eco 1995: 209), which compromises its secularity.

Hence, another option arose: what if the prospective international auxiliary language was not among those already existing but, instead, was a language created specifically for the purposes of international communication? This brings us to the next stage of this debate: the search for perfect and/or universal languages.

The seventeenth century marked the beginning of the language creation boom. Esperanto may be the most well-known to date, but it was only one among a plethora of language projects with different purposes. The idea of artificial languages may sound strange at first, as if they were creations of lunatics or eccentrics (Yaguello 1984; Edwards 2013: 365), but language creation is a very old practice. It began with speculative attempts to reconstruct the original language used by Adam to communicate with God and to name things in the Garden of Eden. It was later converted into a search for a philosophical language (Eco 1995; Maat 2004), which would enable a perfect correspondence between language, on the one hand, and the world and its elements, on the other hand, allowing human beings to express all their ideas clearly.

Over time, events such as the explorations of Marco Polo in China and maritime expansion increased Europe’s interest in the world and its languages (Yaguello 1984: 24-27). In addition, the emergence of nation-states and nationalisms in Europe, as well as a perceived need for international communication, motivated chiefly by the

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9 My discussion on the succession of these projects will be based mainly on the comprehensive writings of Couturat and Leau (1903, 1907), Guérard (1921), Yaguello (1984) and Eco (1995). The plurality of languages created is well illustrated by Eco’s words: “Couturat and Leau analysed 19 models of a priori languages, and another 50 mixed or a posteriori languages; Monnerot-Dumaine reports on 360 projects for international languages; Knowlson lists 83 projects of universal languages during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and, though limiting himself to projects in the nineteenth century, Porset provides a list of 173 titles. Moreover, in the few years I have dedicated to this subject, I have discovered in antiquarian catalogues a large number of works missing from the bibliographies of the preceding books” (1995: 1-2).
relations between states and by the political, social, commercial, and scientific exchanges between people, fostered a more pragmatic and utilitarian approach to communication. In this sense, the search for a universal language gradually paved the way for the quest for an international one.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, projects to develop international auxiliary languages multiplied quickly across Europe. As with the philosophical languages, the first international auxiliary languages were created on the basis of logical constructions, detached from the features and vocabularies of existing languages, in order to be easily learned and to present themselves as ‘neutral’ – meaning having no associations with any national language or nationalism (Couturat and Leau 1903; 1907). The most comprehensive example in this sense, aimed at increasing the capacity for human communication in the broadest way possible, was Solrésol. This language was created in France in 1817 by Jean-François Sudre and was based on musical notes. Its creator expected it to be the most universal language, insofar as it could be written, spoken, sung, whistled, played on an instrument, signed (using fingers and toes) and represented by colours – being, therefore, comprehensible even to blind and deaf people. However, this project failed, due to the limited volume of ideas that could be expressed using only seven musical notes.

Attempting to overcome the difficulties of learning these logically constructed codes, subsequent language creators gave preference to systems containing both logical, newly created elements and features derived from already existing languages. By far the most successful of these was Volapük, created in the German Empire in 1879. During a mystical revelation, Johann Martin Schleyer, a Catholic priest, ‘envisioned [this language] as an instrument to foster unity and brotherhood amongst people’ (Eco 1995: 319). Its main advantage over previous projects was that it was partially based on European languages, mainly on English, which led Volapük to sound somewhat familiar to those who speak European languages. This project received wide support in comparison to its predecessors, and is said to have achieved more than one million speakers (Couturat and Leau 1903: 142; Garvía 2012: 64). Alongside Volapük clubs, classes and congresses, it also relied on magazines and books being published and proficiency certificates being issued. This language is usually considered as a successful project, since it demonstrated the feasibility of
planned international languages. However, some internal conflicts – mainly regarding possible reforms to the language itself – undermined this achievement. During this internal dispute between groups for and against the reform of Volapük, both sides were rushed to establish and consolidate a final version of the language due to the development of another project, considered to be a prospective threat to Volapük: Esperanto.

1.2. The birth of a new contender

The fundamentals of Esperanto were established in 1887 by Lazar Ludwig Zamenhof, a medical doctor born in Bialystok – at the time a part of the Russian Empire, now in Poland. Like a number of other language creators, he was mainly driven by the goals of building brotherhood and promoting justice among peoples (Forster 1982: 5; Tonkin 1997: 74; Nitobe 1998; Li 2003: 36).

Zamenhof was brought up in a Jewish family and grew up amidst different national groups in Bialystok. Russians, Poles, Germans, Belarussians and Jews coexisted in the region in a continuous state of hostility and suspicion, where the divergences in ‘race’, language and religion prevailed in people’s relations with each other (Couturat and Leau 1903: 305; Guérard 1921: 107-108; Korzhenkov 2009: 1; Lins 2016: 3-10). Confronted with these constant clashes, Zamenhof believed that the first obstacle to more harmonious relations was the absence of a code of communication shared by these groups. Therefore, the creation of a neutral common code was a peace-oriented attempt to promote the rapprochement of these peoples through mutual understanding at the linguistic level. Such a language would not replace their existing national and regional languages. On the contrary, it would be a tool to mediate between these peoples, insofar as one national group would not impose its own language on others and they would all be able to rely on a shared auxiliary code of communication, which would be neutral and secular.

Zamenhof published the basis of the language in a booklet entitled Lingvo Internacia, under the pseudonym Doktoro Esperanto (Doctor Hopeful), and Esperanto later became the name of the language itself. In this brochure he included
a slip of paper, to be signed and returned to him, in which the reader would declare that they would learn the language when ten million people signed up to the same commitment. However, most of the readers began to learn it straight away. Zamenhof collected the contact details they had sent and soon published an address list with information about a thousand Esperanto learners up to that point, the majority of them based in the Russian Empire (Lins 2016: 11). This address list enabled these pioneering users of the language to establish the first contacts with each other using Esperanto.

As with Volapük in its early years, Esperanto proliferated quickly. It started gaining supporters and, a few years after its creation, the initial booklet, originally published in Russian, had already been translated into many languages. Esperanto clubs and associations were created in several countries, periodicals – *Esperantisto* being the most popular one – were regularly published with news and information about diverse topics, and books (including novels and poetry) were written in Esperanto, as well as translated from other languages.

Nevertheless, Zamenhof’s project soon started to encounter obstacles. When Leo Tolstoy declared his support for Esperanto and some Tolstoyans began to promote their ideas through the language, Russian censorship prohibited the circulation of the periodical *Esperantisto* in the country. Esperanto was no longer seen as a ‘hobby of impractical idealists’ and became, in the eyes of the Russian state, an ally for the advocates for social reform through religion (Lins 2016: 16-17). However, while facing difficulties in Russia, Esperanto was flourishing in Western Europe: in Paris alone in 1902-1903 there were 19 Esperanto courses being taught simultaneously (Couturat and Leau 1903: 329). In France, as we will see later, Esperanto mainly attracted members of the intellectual and bourgeois elites, including influential figures in French scientific and philosophical milieux. This spatial dislocation of Esperanto also entailed changes in the reasons why people felt attracted to it. Russian Esperantists were highly influenced by the idea of a language that could mediate national conflicts, given the situation of the Russian Empire at that time. By contrast, this argument was not equally relevant to the French, who regarded the language as an outcome of and as a tool to promote the progress of civilisation and the supremacy of reason.
The prominence of discussions on planned languages at that time was demonstrated by the creation of the *Délégation pour l'adoption d'une langue auxiliaire internationale* (Delegation for the Adoption of an International Auxiliary Language), established after the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris. This Delegation sought to choose and promote one of the several existing international auxiliary language projects. Esperanto was one of the contenders, but the Delegation’s final report favoured an offshoot of Esperanto, called Ido. Nonetheless, Ido did not achieve the growth of Esperanto. In 1904, the first international Esperanto gathering was held in Dover and in Calais, during which French and British Esperantists crossed the English Channel to meet and use the language. In the following year, the First Universal Congress of Esperanto was held in Boulogne-sur-Mer, attended by 650 adherents from different national backgrounds who, for the first time, experienced the language working on a large scale and being used in every activity during the congress.

The congress participants also approved the *Declaration on the Essence of Esperantism*, also known as *Declaration of Boulogne*, which constituted the first document to define the aims and priorities of the developing movement to support and advance Esperanto. This Declaration, endorsed by Zamenhof, outlined *Esperantism* as the promotion of a language founded upon ‘*neŭtrale homa*’ (neutrally human) principles (Zamenhof 1929 [1906]: 324) that would allow understanding between people from different nations without being associated with any particular religion or political stance. However, Esperantists who were interested in these issues were allowed to organise their own debate groups in Esperanto and to promote the language in their specific settings, as long as they did not associate Esperanto with a particular religion or political view. This approach to neutrality was a way to welcome everyone, irrespective of the ideas and viewpoints held by each of its speakers and supporters.

Despite efforts to emphasise Esperanto’s utility and to downplay any ideological stance attached to it, more and more people were learning and using the language as a way to advance their social, political, and religious viewpoints. Zamenhof himself considered the language as just a part of his efforts to bring humankind together on the basis of reciprocal fraternity, equality and justice, as he also wanted to use
Esperanto to promote *Homaranismo*, his philosophically pure ‘religion of humanity’ (Couturat and Leau 1907: 40; Lins 2016: 25-28). Although Homaranismo was widely rejected by Esperantists during the Second Universal Congress of Esperanto, in Geneva, in 1906, Zamenhof insisted on supporting what he called the *interna idea* (inner idea) of Esperanto. This conveyed, in a softened way, his intent to use the language to mediate between peoples and to promote fraternity and justice. The participants of this congress also endorsed the *Declaration on the Neutrality of Esperanto Congresses*, stating that these meetings would be neutral, constituting forums in which everything that could bring peoples together and overcome discrimination would be open for debate.

The links between Esperanto and social and political stances developed further. Throughout the twentieth century, several socialists, communists, anarchists, pacifists and those engaged with workers’ movements became interested in using Esperanto to spread their causes and to promote debates with fellow activists from other language backgrounds. It was no surprise that the internationalist and all-inclusive character of Esperanto had attracted these groups. This internationalism, however, also prevented the expansion of Esperanto in some settings. In interwar Germany, for instance, devotion to Esperanto was seen by many German non-Esperantists as opposition to the mother tongue and to the Fatherland, which forced German Esperantists to conceal internationalism and patriotism in their discourses and practices, in order to avoid condemnation (Lins 2016: 87-107).

During the first half of the twentieth century, Esperanto went through a period of institutionalisation, spread and diversification, as well as opposition. Following Zamenhof’s plea to give up his ownership of the language on behalf of its growing speech community, some institutions were established in order to guide the development of Esperanto, notably the Language Committee (oriented at overseeing and stewarding the evolution of the language)\(^{10}\) and the Congress Committee (responsible for holding the annual Esperanto congresses). In 1906, the *Esperantista Centra Oficejo* (Esperantist Central Office) was founded in Paris, under the auspices of Hippolyte Sébert, bringing these two committees together under one

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\(^{10}\) In 1948, the Language Committee was transformed into the *Akademio de Esperanto* (Academy of Esperanto).
administrative structure. In Geneva, in 1908, Hector Hodler founded the *Universala Esperanto-Asocio* (Universal Esperanto Association, henceforth UEA). With the foundation of UEA, Hodler aimed to provide services and support for individual Esperantists through the constitution of a global network of delegates and representatives, as well as to set the grounds for the establishment of a more practical internationalism. In Hodler’s view, Esperantists should make concrete efforts towards the improvement of human relations around them, rather than merely speaking abstractly about brotherhood among peoples (Lins 2016: 33). This combination of idealism and practice led UEA to reach 7,000 paying members in 1914. Following the death of Zamenhof, in 1917, UEA came to be seen as the new leadership for the movement.

The year 1914 also meant further changes to the Esperanto community and movement. The First World War forced the cancellation of the Universal Congress for several years and, because freedom of circulation was compromised in many places, Esperanto meetings became more sporadic. Against this background, UEA took advantage of the neutrality of Switzerland, where its headquarters were located, to help those in need by delivering food, clothing and medical supplies and by forwarding family correspondence between people living in hostile countries. Both Esperantists and non-Esperantists who were unable to exchange letters directly due to censorship or due to the blockages of correspondence coming from enemy countries could send these letters to UEA. This would forward them to the addressee, as well as provide translation from one national language to another, if needed (Forster 1982: 159; Lins 2016: 49). This service was widely announced in the non-Esperantist press, spreading the word about Esperanto and UEA, as well as helping people who otherwise would be unable to communicate.

The period starting with the First World War also saw a strengthening of the use of Esperanto by workers, anarchists, communists and pacifists – in sum, leftists who were against the war and who found in Esperanto a tool to communicate and to share their convictions, as well as to network with like-minded people across the world. In 1921, the *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda* (World Non-National Association, hereafter
SAT) was founded by Eugène Lanti.\footnote{His name was Eugène Adam, and Lanti (a variation of l’anti, the against-person) his pseudonym (Lins 2016: 168).} Lanti launched his manifesto *Down with neutralism!* (Lanti 1922) as a response to UEA’s neutrality. He identified the broader Esperanto movement as bourgeois, and argued for an international forum in which proletarians and laypeople could see Esperanto not as a cause to be promoted in its own right, but as a tool to unite workers of the world and to serve the international class struggle. The creation of SAT as an international association oriented towards workers and left-leaning Esperantists reinforced a partition between the hitherto traditional neutral Esperanto movement and the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement, leading to a schism along class lines (Lins 2016: 64).\footnote{The diversity of worker’s Esperanto associations and the use that these proletarians and activists made of the language in the wider workers’ movement from 1918 to 1939 are comprehensively presented by Markov (1999).}

Apart from these internal schisms and unfolding events, the period of the World Wars also brought devastating consequences to Esperanto from outside of its community and movement. Right after and during the World Wars, a nationalist wave arose among some Esperantists, mainly in Germany, where some used this language to promote German nationalist values to people abroad. However, in parallel with this, the hostility and repression against Esperanto escalated quickly. Totalitarian regimes regarded the internationalist and pacifist values often associated with Esperanto as a threat to National Socialism in Germany and to patriotic national regimes.\footnote{The hostility Esperanto suffered from totalitarian and dictatorial regimes went beyond the scope of Europe. Esperantists were seen as subversive even in countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Brazil (Lins 2016: 44–46, 72–73, 144–145; Fians 2017a: 38–39). It is interesting to note that, in Korea, the teaching of Esperanto and of the Korean language was forbidden by the Japanese government in the same year (1937).} At first, totalitarian regimes such as Nazism\footnote{With the Holocaust, this situation was also aggravated due to Zamenhof’s Jewish origins. Hitler himself alludes to it (1939: 240), depicting the language as part of a plan for domination designed by the Jews. As pointed out by Tonkin (2011: 162), ‘Hitler was not entirely wrong when, in Mein Kampf, he described Esperanto as a language of Jews and communists’, since ‘the number of Jews and leftists associated with it, particularly in the inter-war years, was disproportionately high’.} were preoccupied mainly with repressing the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement and the political activities of some Esperantists. Later, however, these constraints also affected the neutral Esperanto movement, insofar as the language came to be more and more associated with workers, anti-fascists and revolutionaries, and considered as a means for spreading ‘dangerous’ ideas [see Figure 3 and Figure 4 below]. In the Third Reich, many Esperanto associations and clubs were closed down and Esperantists...
were closely monitored by the government. In Estonia in 1925, some workers’ Esperanto groups were prevented from beginning their operations due to the incarceration of most of their members. In Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, it was forbidden to receive publications from SAT (see Lins 2016: Part II). Primarily a persecution of left-leaning Esperantists, the situation developed into general hostility against the very right of Esperanto to exist.

Fig. 3: Poster saying, in Esperanto: ‘What are you doing to stop this? Esperantists of the world, put your strength against international fascism’ [Source: Comissariat de Propaganda de la Generalitat de Catalunya, c.1936. Available at the US Library of Congress].

Fig. 4: Poster in French, encouraging workers from the world to come together and to break down the wall of languages that keeps them apart [Source: SAT-Amikaro, c.1955. Available at the archives of SAT-Amikaro].

In the meantime, in Eastern Europe, Esperanto was faring any better. In its early days, many of those who supported Esperanto were living in the Russian Empire, and the 1917 Revolution created an opportunity for it to strengthen in that country. Due to the developing links between workers’ movements and Esperanto, the language was understood as a tool to bring the worldwide proletariat together, which would enable cultural collaborations that would lead to the creation of a proletarian, international culture. However, the late Lenin government interrupted the support
that Esperanto was beginning to receive by placing a stronger emphasis on proletarians being brought together on political and economic bases, rather than cultural and language ones. Lenin offered support to the development of local ethnic cultures and languages and fought against illiteracy in the USSR, but the creation of a proletarian international culture through an international language was not among his administration’s priorities. Later, the Stalin government drove the USSR to a more Western-like model of nation-state, which included the need for a national language. This was pursued through efforts to consolidate the Russian language in this role. This new orientation marginalised not only Esperanto – then perceived in the USSR as a project immersed in bourgeois ideas, opposed to the socialist regime – but also other minority languages spoken in Russian territory. Once well appraised as a critical tool for the would-be international workers’ culture, Esperanto in the USSR was later treated as ‘dangerous’ (Lins 2016, 2017).

During the interwar period, the creation of the League of Nations in 1920 provided Esperantists with some hope for official recognition by an international body. In 1945, with the replacement of the League of Nations with the United Nations (UN), UEA played an active role as an international pressure group, especially through the figure of its president, Ivo Lapenna. After the Second World War, a petition supported the collection of signatures urging the UN to endorse and to encourage the spread of Esperanto. During the 1954 UNESCO General Conference, in Montevideo, the issue of an international language came under the spotlight and UEA sent Lapenna to attend this conference as UEA’s representative. With the support of a document issued by an institution linked to UEA, stating the commonalities between this association’s efforts and UNESCO’s aims and ideals, UNESCO presented a resolution in favour of Esperanto and awarded UEA the status of an organisation in consultative relations with the UN and UNESCO (Forster 1982: 242-248). This status continues to date, and was significant in shaping the new directions followed by UEA under the influence of Lapenna, with human rights becoming one of the core features in the association’s agenda. In doing so, UEA redefined its conception of neutrality: in trying to distance itself from an image of passivity, the promotion of Esperanto would be closely linked to the defence of human rights, especially in its linguistic aspects, through language rights and the defence of minority languages.
Aside from some schisms within both the workers’ and the neutral Esperanto movements, a further layer was added to the neutral movement in 1956, with the creation of the Tutmonda Esperantista Junulara Organizo (World Esperantist Youth Organisation, henceforth TEJO), the youth association linked to UEA. In 1980, on the annual International Esperanto Youth Congress, some members of TEJO launched the Rauma Manifesto, calling for the strengthening of the relations among existing Esperantists, rather than a heavy investment in the continued promotion of Esperanto to others. As a belated response, UEA released the Prague Manifesto in 1996, reinforcing its conviction of the role that Esperanto and Esperantists should continuously play to contribute to the goals fostered by the UN and UNESCO.

Further political and territorial reconfigurations that were highly significant to Esperanto included the end of the Cold War in 1991, which left no grounds for justifying the promotion of Esperanto as an alternative to the opposition between English and Russian, since the end of this war marked the triumph of English. On the other hand, the creation of the European Union, in 1993, set the stage for addressing the language problem within debates about European integration, with pressure groups using Esperanto as a platform to debate multilingualism and language rights.

In terms of institutionalisation, new Esperanto associations were created and others died out throughout the twentieth century. Apart from international Esperanto associations, such as UEA and SAT, there are also landaj asocioj (national associations) and fakaj asocioj (specialist associations, which are focused on promoting the language among specific groups or gathering Esperantists around specific subjects, hobbies, interests or professional occupations). It is worth noting the rise and fall of some of these specialist branches of the Esperanto movement, such as those oriented to Catholics and to railway workers, which were once very active. During the second half of the twentieth century, there was also a notable spatial reconfiguration of Esperantujo. Chiefly as an outcome of the long-standing governmental hostility towards Esperanto in Central and Eastern Europe, some groups in these regions moved away from Esperanto. This change, however, was

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15 In the 1920s and 1930s, SAT’s membership was largely affected by a dispute between SAT and the Sovetlanda Esperantista Unio (SEU, Soviet Esperantist Union) (SAT 1953; Lins 2016). Similarly, the neutral movement saw a split between UEA and the Internacia Esperant-Ligo (IEL, International Esperanto League), though both were later reunited under the name UEA.
followed by a growth in the number of Esperantists and Esperanto associations in the Americas and in East Asia. Different levels of institutionalisation followed this tendency of dispersion. Despite the existence of Esperanto speakers in Africa, for example, they are not often organised in national associations or in institutionalised local clubs, and their access to online means of communication tends to be more limited, which renders their participation in the Esperanto community and movement less visible.

1.3. Among neutralists, leftists and polyglots

Throughout the history of Esperanto outlined above, it is worth emphasising three major aspects, namely: the groups interested in Esperanto, the changes and diversification in the agendas linked to the language, and the means of communication and transportation that enable the existence and the dynamics of the Esperanto community and movement. In other words, we must focus on the actors and connections that make the continuing existence of Esperanto possible.

At first a language spoken only by its initiator, Esperanto as a community and movement has grown in spread and in complexity. It has gained support from people from different profiles and backgrounds and has become widely associated with several forms of internationalism, drawing from diverse social and political agendas. From the language of Jews and Russian Tolstoyans, it also became the language of French intellectuals and bourgeois, and later that of proletarians, pacifists, anti-fascists, and many other groups, such as, nowadays, polyglots and language lovers. As Garvía highlights:

> Esperantists came from all walks of life and chose to learn the language for quite different reasons. They were Bolsheviks, anarchists, and socialists; atheists, and religious-minded people; Catholics and Protestants; feminists and conservatives; blind people; Social Darwinists and people convinced of the sacrality of all human

16 Regarding East Asia, Rapley (2013) and Lins (2008) show how the possibility of engaging with global and transnational principles, as well as the idea of resisting colonisation through modernisation, supported the promotion of Esperanto in China and in Japan. The links with anarchism were especially important for the flourishing of Esperanto in China (Müller and Benton 2006). The connections between this language and internationalism elicit some resistance to it in certain Middle Eastern and African countries, in which Esperanto is seen as a Western import and, therefore, as something undesired.
life; Herderians and anti-nationalists; people exploring new life styles and ‘hidden worlds’, and people concerned about real-world problems; scientists and Nobel Prize winners and workers with a basic education; librarians and Taylorist engineers; and radical and conservative pacifists (2015: 128).

Changes in the profile of this community and movement cannot be disconnected from changes in the programme linked to the language. At first seen as a universalist and humanist project, aiming to bring people together beyond their different ‘racial’, national and religious backgrounds, it increasingly turned its focus onto a valorisation of internationalism and multiculturalism, as I will explore further in Chapter 2. This does not contradict the previous claims for a common humanity shared by everyone, but marks a shift in emphasis towards the differences between us and what we have to share through the mediation, enabled by international communication, between people from different backgrounds. This shift from commonalities to differences was also followed by the previously mentioned links with human rights after the creation of the UN and preceded by the schism between the neutralists (usually referred to as samideanoj, fellow thinkers) and the revolutionaries, workers and leftists (or kamaradoj and sennaciistoj, comrades and non-nationalists).

Furthermore, as presented above, the history of Esperanto is closely connected to the history of the means of communication and transportation. Starting from the nineteenth century, the development and popularisation of postal services, the telegraph, the telephone, and the radio, as well as increasingly integrated transportation networks across the globe, including trains, ships and airplanes, provided the infrastructure that intensified contacts between peoples. This paved the way for the need for communication that resulted in the search for international auxiliary languages, Esperanto among them. More recently, the popularisation of the internet, as well as an increasingly accessibility to air travel, took international circulation to another level, intensifying contacts among people with different language backgrounds and helping Esperanto to expand far beyond Europe. This also strengthened the participation of existing Esperantists from other continents in the network-like Esperantujo. In this vein, since Esperanto is a language and its practical use relates to communicating and mediating between fellow speakers, means of
communication and transportation play a crucial role in developing and integrating those who speak and support Esperanto.

In this fashion, the language has travelled around the world gathering speakers and supporters and enabling communication for over a century. With the language, people, things and ideas have also travelled. This poses a question: if Esperanto counts on a sizeable speech community that is not geographically bounded, but rather scattered over the world, how can one conduct ethnographic research on it? After locating Esperanto in time through this historical outline, my next task is to locate it in space, beginning with UEA headquarters, in the Netherlands.

1.4. The social life of cardboard boxes

Rotterdam, late April 2017. It was my third day in a month of fieldwork in the headquarters of UEA, before going back to my main field site in Paris. In a four-storey building at Nieuwe Binnenweg 176, this address – known by many Esperantists across the world – houses the offices of both UEA and TEJO. These associations employ sixteen on-site staff members, who come from different national backgrounds and countries of origin, and who use Esperanto regularly as their working language. Unsurprisingly, since TEJO is a youth-oriented association, most of its staff is made of young remunerated volunteers on one-year contracts, whereas most of UEA staff are middle-aged or elderly full-time and part-time workers. The only exceptions to this are two retired staff who have continued to volunteer at UEA after their retirement. As the annual Universal Congress of Esperanto (organised by this association) was approaching, the office workers and volunteers there were busier than usual, and I, the anthropologist, was called on to help.

Judit, the general director of UEA, asked me to assist Andrei, the office worker responsible for the bookshop. Our task was to collect, price and pack the books and materials that were to be sent to South Korea, where the forthcoming congress would take place in late July. Andrei explained the task to me: I would help him to pack around seventy boxes with books, divided by category and size, to be dispatched to
Seoul and, later, displayed and sold in the congress’ bookshop. He gave me some worn out cardboard boxes and said:

> We’re going to reuse these old boxes. They are the same we used to transport materials for the bookshop in Nitra last year [in Slovakia, where the previous congress was held] and some of these boxes had been used many times before, at many other congresses. Some of them have already been to two or three continents, five or six countries, and have travelled more than many people here!

Andrei has been working at UEA’s bookshop for around fifteen years. He has already read plenty of the books he sells and he knows by heart where they are all located. I asked him about how he chooses which materials would be sent to the bookshop at these congresses. He answered:

> I usually have a general idea, based on what was sold in previous years, but it also varies a lot […]. It’s always like a wheel of fortune, in which we never know what the results will be like… And I also adapt the content of the bookshop according to the country and the region where the congress takes place. So, if it’s in Asia, I’ll send more books translated from Asian literature, books about subjects that may be more interesting for Asian Esperantists, teaching materials more oriented to an Asian public… For the same reason, I always check the list of people who are registered for the congress, to see their nationality and to think about the kinds of books they might be interested in buying.

Despite the fact that UEA’s bookshop also sells products other than books, Andrei and I were packing only books. In answer to my question about this, Andrei gave me a logistical reason for this choice:

> Usually we send a lot of CDs and DVDs as well, but not this year. When the congress is in Europe, it’s easier and cheaper to transport all these things. But because this one will be in South Korea, the carrier that will ship all this told us that we can send books and pay only the transportation costs, but if we send CDs and DVDs we have to pay special taxes for this material to enter the country, and that would be too expensive. It means we would have to raise the price of these products when selling them at the congress and it wouldn’t be worth it. So, we’re sending only books this time.

While chatting about the books of poetry, novels, national anthologies, linguistics, and language learning materials we were packing, we also talked about the sales at UEA’s bookshop:

> The sales in our bookshop are not as high as before… I know that a lot of other things have also changed. In the past, the television, the internet, they didn’t exist – thus people had more free time; more time to read books. And Esperantists, particularly, used to read a lot: apart from congresses and local meetings, the only way they had to use the language was through reading magazines and books.
Nowadays people can read things in Esperanto and contact Esperantists on the internet, everywhere, and they don’t rely on magazines and books as they did before. Then, it was time for the lunch break. I went upstairs, where I met Zlata, the main person responsible for the association’s accountancy and finance, and Hendrik, the retired staff member who volunteered as a proofreader of the articles to be published at *Esperanto*, the monthly magazine edited by UEA. Zlata told me, astonished, that she had seventy-five unread messages in her professional mailbox, most of them from people who had paid the registration fees to attend the forthcoming congress. She had to deal with these financial operations, making money circulate from people’s bank accounts to UEA, and then from UEA’s managerial system to the congress’ local organising committee – which was responsible for registering the participants and for allocating rooms to those who chose the accommodation options offered by the organisers. We talked for a few minutes about some of the congress participants who were planning to spend more than one week in South Korea, travelling around the country before and after the week of the congress. I suggested that most of those who regularly attend Universal Congresses must be quite rich, but she partially disagreed with me:

Yes, some of them do have money, but I wouldn’t say that they are the majority. There are some people who spend the whole year saving the money to attend these congresses. In these cases, they may even have a very simple lifestyle, but they consider the Universal Congress to be something so important that they want to make sure they’ll have the money to attend them quite often, or, if possible, every year.

After having lunch with the other office workers and volunteers in the association’s refectory, Andrei and I went back to the books and cardboard boxes. He was staring at the booklist and at a pile of empty boxes, and then turned to me:

The thing is that, for this year’s congress, apart from Korean Esperantists, everybody else has to take a plane to reach South Korea. It means that fewer people will buy books this time, because of the weight of the luggage – people won’t be willing to pay for the extra weight on the plane […]. Besides, there are fewer participants registered to attend the congress this year, because of the distance from Europe [where most of the regular congress-goers live], and also because many elderly people are afraid of dealing with such different living conditions in Asia, such as the weather, the long time spent travelling, and the food habits there. Many older Esperantists are afraid of having health problems after eating the food there, for instance, and some end up giving up on the trip.
During our work, I asked him about the sales in the bookshop and the changes in it during the time he had been working there. He said:

Yes, the sales have decreased enormously, and also the way people buy things has changed. Nowadays most of the sales take place online, through UEA’s website and WhatsApp messages. We also receive orders by phone, mainly from European Esperantists, because phone calls within Europe are cheaper nowadays and people usually want to ask for more information about the books before buying them. Some people send letters to order books, but nowadays this is very rare. Also, despite a decrease in sales in general, I noticed that sales to some countries have increased. The orders from Esperantists in Brazil, for instance, have increased. It seems that something happened there that enabled Brazilian Esperantists to be in a better financial situation than before. Individual orders from China have increased as well. In South America in general, there was a growth in the sales, but it also changes according to the instability of some countries. In Argentina, for instance, we have increases and decreases from time to time.

Apart from the changes in the ways people order books, CDs and DVDs, he also pinpointed changes in currency and in methods of payment, arguing that the creation of the Euro made it easier for UEA to sell products within the European Union. Before, Andrei constantly had to calculate the conversion rates from Dutch Guilder to other currencies. Likewise, the creation of online payment systems like PayPal and the fact that many credit cards nowadays can be used for international transactions has made it easier for people to move money overseas, which helped to increase sales to Esperantists outside the Eurozone.

At the end of the afternoon, a courier arrived in a truck bringing piles of copies of the magazine Kontakto, the bimonthly magazine edited by TEJO. While Andrei and I packed the books that would be sent to Seoul, Laëtitia and Mihaela, volunteers at TEJO, were walking from one side of the building to the other, carrying huge bags with copies of the magazine, in order to stick address labels and, later, send them to the members of TEJO.

Once Andrei and I finished packing the books, it was Johannes, another staff member at UEA’s office, who would contact the carrier and double check the conditions and prices for shipping all those cardboard boxes to South Korea. Since Johannes was one of the few native Dutch speakers in the office, he was responsible for most external communication and contact with suppliers within the Netherlands. However, this task would not be done that day, since the working day was over.
When I arrived at the house I shared with the volunteers of UEA and TEJO, Julien and Fabrizio, two of the TEJO volunteers, were preparing dinner while chatting about the tasks that Julien had carried out that day. He seemed to have been thwarted by some issues TEJO had been having with the Schengen policy on borders, visas and passports. A few weeks earlier, the annual *Internacia Junulara Festivalo* (IJF, International Esperanto Youth Festival) was held in Italy and, among other participants, the organisers were also expecting fourteen young Esperantists from Benin and Togo. These African Esperantists were members of the local organising committee of the forthcoming *Internacia Junulara Kongreso* (IJK, International Esperanto Youth Congress), which would take place in Togo that year, in early August 2017. This project to hold the first international Esperanto youth meeting in Africa was relying on financial support from the European Union’s programme Erasmus+, within the scope of a cultural exchange between Africa and Europe.

Julien told us that ten of the fourteen African Esperantists who were expected in this festival in Italy had not managed to obtain the Schengen visa:

> The Italian embassy there alleged that these Africans didn’t have enough documents to prove they would go back to their countries after the Esperanto festival, and denied their visa applications. Their participation in this festival would be important because they would receive training, to better get involved and collaborate with NGOs in the EU and to better organise the congress…

What surprised Julien the most was the fact that their travel expenses would be covered by the grant TEJO received from the EU and that this training was a requirement for those who work in projects related to Erasmus+. However, the same EU that allowed them to join this project stopped them from participating in it in practice, due to the borders and visa regulations imposed on non-EU nationals.

> After having this conversation over dinner, we all went to sleep early, but not without talking first about the visitors UEA would welcome the following day for the association’s Open Day. Two Esperantists, one coming from Poland and another one from Germany, would deliver talks for the guests. These were expected to come from many places in the Netherlands and from surrounding countries like Belgium, Germany and France. The travelling and circulation involving people, things and places would not stop, and even though UEA’s office offered a comfortable armchair from where I could see people and things being set in motion, the anthropologist is
also supposed to join these flows at some point. Where could Esperanto bring me next?

1.5. Territorialising Esperantoland

In this narrative of a normal day at the Central Office of UEA and TEJO, even if we try to narrate it otherwise, we will necessarily notice some words and ideas that are repeated throughout the vignette – or, shall we say, throughout the day. These include a certain future orientation expressed by the words ‘later’ and ‘forthcoming’, referring to magazines to be proofread, published and read, congresses and meetings to be held and attended, and other activities, open days, and talks to take place in the near future. Similarly, and more importantly, there is a vast array of words and expressions related to circulation and mobility: to come, to go, to transfer, to pack, to send, to post, to mail, to dispatch, to receive, to travel, to attend – in sum, to circulate in many different ways. These are some of the ideas and practices I had to account for when engaging with Esperanto ethnographically.

This takes us to the crucial methodological consideration previously mentioned: where can we find and how can we approach Esperanto speakers and Esperantists ethnographically, given that they are not concentrated in a bounded geographical location? Aside from this office in Rotterdam and from the eventual congresses, gatherings and festivals carried out in the language and oriented to its speakers, how can we conduct long-term fieldwork with people who are, as Lennon and McCartney would say, here, there and everywhere? In other words, people who are scattered everywhere, but grouped nowhere – or at least not for any length of time?

As Tsing puts it, ‘global connections are everywhere. So how does one study the global?’ (2005: 1). This may sound like an exclusively methodological question, but it is also one of the issues that move Esperanto speakers in general: ‘once I learn the language, how can I meet people who also speak it?’ ‘How can I be – and what is it like to be – an Esperantist in practice?’ Despite the existence of a significant number of Esperanto speakers scattered around the world, the very fact that they are dispersed, rather than geographically concentrated, prevents their establishment as
bounded speech communities. However, at the local level, there are usually mechanisms to bring Esperantists together, mainly through informal Esperanto groups and clubs or more institutionalised, registered associations. These groups and associations provide the setting and the structure that enables the organisation of regular face-to-face, local meetings, wherein local speakers can practice the language.

Yet this also raises another question: what is communicated when people use Esperanto? After all, once Esperanto speakers meet, they are supposed to speak about something. For this reason, the formation and maintenance of local groups and associations are usually based on a search for a common ground; for common interests that can bring Esperanto speakers and association members together. In this sense, let us reach back to the ideal-typical Esperantist and to the historical outline above. The set of cosmopolitan principles that lead Esperantists to seek to communicate in a more equitable and fairer way, as well as a willingness to see the world beyond the limits of one’s mother tongues, provide the basis for the establishment of an idea of community that brings together the ideas of speech community and of community of practice. In this way, local Esperanto groups and associations are local enactments of this wider, scattered community called Esperantujo.

The use of Esperantujo or, alternatively, Esperantio, to refer to the Esperanto community reveals linguistically relevant choices. Both words can be roughly translated as ‘Esperantoland’, as the suffixes -uj- and -i- are used to refer to most countries’ names.17 Interestingly, the suffix -uj-, suggested by Zamenhof in the fundamentals of the language, also refers to containers (such as in monujo, wallet, or inkujo, inkwell), whereas -i-, a later variation, can refer to countries, as well as to professions (as in antropologio, anthropology, for example). In this sense, the suffix -uj- emphasises the population contained in a country,18 whereas -i- focuses on the area of a country, in terms of territory. Yet, even though the two words that stand for

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17 For instance, France can be translated either as Francujo or Francio; and England, as Anglujo or Anglio.
18 Along these lines: Franco, a Frenchman, and Francujo, a container for the French. Zamenhof suggested -i- in his 1894 language reform proposal, as an alternative to avoid determinist overtones of a country being a container for a specific people or ethnic group (Forster 1982: 136).
Esperantoland refer directly to territory, Esperantists do not lay any claim for a national territory whatsoever.\textsuperscript{19}

Such a rejection of stabilising Esperantujo in territorial terms is entirely in line with the fact that this community is international and internationally-oriented as a matter of principle. The effort of learning Esperanto and becoming involved with it is compensated for the opportunities brought by situations in which the use of this language is necessary, such as in the Universal Congress that was being thoughtfully prepared by the volunteers and office workers from UEA. In these international meetings, the use of Esperanto becomes meaningful to the extent that it becomes a necessary mediator between people from different language backgrounds, in cases where Esperanto may be the only language two people have in common in a conversation, or the common language in which they can express themselves more comfortably, as I witnessed in the Universal Congresses I attended.

The international orientation of this community was made clear by Patrice, a 50-year-old French Esperantist, in a debate held in Esperanto at Espéranto France (the French Esperanto association linked to UEA, with headquarters in Paris). Commenting on the frame of that debate itself, he said:

\begin{quote}
For me, this is artificial; this is not real Esperantujo. We are a group of French people speaking Esperanto, but we could as well be speaking French. What is real is to go abroad and to speak with foreign Esperantists there. You, for instance [pointing at me, the only foreigner in the conversation], give us reasons to speak Esperanto, and this is good, but this meeting here, the meetings we have in these associations here in Paris… They are all very nice, I like these people here a lot, but this is not the best way to be an Esperantist. This is artificial. I always take part in these meetings because I like these people, I like to be here and to have opportunities to practice Esperanto, but I find it artificial.
\end{quote}

The very fact that the members of this community are dispersed around the world is one of the core features that entices Esperantists to come together. However, these speakers’ regular membership and engagement with the community is quite a fragile one. The fundamental element that animates Esperantujo is people’s willingness to

\textsuperscript{19} There were attempts to create Esperanto-speaking territories, in which this language would be used as an official language. The two most remarkable attempts in this sense were the contested Belgian-Prussian territory of Neŭtrala Moresneto (Neutral Moresnet) in 1908 (Żelichowski 2009: 215) and the short-lived micronation near the Italian coast called Respubliko de la Insulo de la Rozoj (Republic of Rose Island), which was both declared independent and destroyed in 1968 (Hayward 2014: 2). However, these attempts did not last long, for they failed to gain the support of Esperantists and succeeded in producing hostile reactions from their surrounding countries.
both learn and speak the language but, because of the non-compulsory character of this language, Esperantists can easily stop engaging with fellow speakers and give up their belonging to this community. Moreover, Esperanto speakers do not speak Esperanto all the time and do not make their *Esperantoness*, if we may call it that, always evident – which makes them relatively invisible. This brings us back to the issue raised previously: Esperantists are anywhere – but, at the same time, may be imperceptibly everywhere. Therefore, again, how can we find and meet them systematically?

When facing a similar ethnographic challenge, Shokeid (1988, 2007: 309) suggested the expression ‘one-night-stand ethnicity’ to refer to occasions in which Israeli migrants in New York gathered in private or public venues to sing along to popular Israeli songs. Since these migrants did not seem to establish a stable and close-knit group, these moments were the only occasions in which their national belonging was made evident through their relations with their fellow nationals. Likewise, Esperantists may casually display in public their relationship with Esperanto: wearing t-shirts, pins, caps or bags with references to Esperanto, as well as reading books in Esperanto in public places and promoting the language as ways of displaying Esperantoness. Nonetheless, the only occasions in which such engagement is made unmistakably visible is when Esperantists are using the language and are gathered, in classes, congresses, and occasional or regular meetings of all sorts, which suggests a notion of the Esperanto community as a one-night-stand (speech) community.

The methodological issue, then, is: how can we engage continuously with Esperantists through long-term fieldwork if they are not territorially stabilised as a community and if they are not full-time Esperantists – in other words, if the enactments of Esperantujo are spatially and temporally feeble? This community is built around certain engagements with territoriality and space, but it manifests itself as unbounded and unchartable, making it unfeasible to give a reliable account of its extension, spread and total number of speakers. I argue that if Esperantujo is formulated based on practices of one-night-stand community-building, the same should apply to an anthropological study of it.
Establishing and stabilising Esperantujo in territorial terms is an issue for both Esperantists and ethnographers alike, which places mapping and circulating as a core methodological issue and one of the central analytical concerns here. For long, Esperantists have attempted to provide an account of this community and to encourage dynamic exchanges among its members through the establishment of clubs, federations and associations on different scales: local, regional, national and international/supranational. These institutions often provide instruments for bringing Esperantists together. Two of these early instruments, which still exist to date, in ever-updated versions, are the Adresaro and the Jarlibro (respectively, Address Book and Yearbook). These contain contact details of Esperanto associations’ representatives and members, as well as information about Esperanto-related events to take place across the world. More recent tools designed by individual Esperantists and by associations to locate fellow Esperanto speakers include the use of the internet and of GPS devices for cartographic purposes. Examples of this include the map available at the website Esperantujo, La Esperantista Mondmapo (The Esperantist World Map), in which users can create a profile and register their position on the globe; and the map available at Pasporta Servo’s (Passport Service) website, displaying those who want to be hosts and guests in a hospitality service carried out in the language. Esperanto associations have also been making use of these technologies: Espéranto France’s website displays a map with information on clubs and associations organised by French department, and UEA prepared a map with registered local organisations around the world [Figure 5]. Moreover, Amikumu, a mobile phone app, enables its users to locate and contact fellow Esperanto speakers, as well as speakers of other languages, nearby.

Just as mapping helps to territorialise Esperantujo through showing where to find Esperantists and associations, maps also provide to non-Esperanto speakers a global image of this community, constituting, therefore, an effective tool mobilised by the Esperanto movement. Commenting on how the Basque nation is visually conveyed through maps, Urla (1993: 824-832) shows how Basque nationalist language

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20 Pasporta Servo works in a similar fashion to services such as Couchsurfing. The striking differences are (a) Pasporta Servo came first, being created in 1974, (b) it aims to establish a more egalitarian, Esperanto-mediated communication between hosts and guests through a language that is not the first language of any of those involved in the relationship, and (c) it claims to reinforce the togetherness that constitutes Esperantujo.
organisations represent, in their publications, maps of the Basque country detached from its surrounding geographic context. In doing this, these cartographic representations emphasise the autonomy of the Basque country, in contrast with its image as a mere region enshrined in Spanish and French territories. Along similar lines, in featuring Esperantujo through the use of world maps, the Esperanto movement resorts to cartography to exhibit its global reach.

Fig. 5: Esperanto associations, on a map made available by UEA and regularly updated by users of the website Esperanto.net. It is worth noticing that this map shows the level of institutionalisation of the use of Esperanto through the geographical distribution of associations, not of Esperanto speakers [Source: website Esperanto.net, retrieved February 2019].

In his opening speech at the Third Universal Congress of Esperanto in Cambridge, in 1907, Zamenhof asserted that these congresses offer possibilities for Esperantists to meet every year in the ‘capital city of Esperantujo’ (Zamenhof, reproduced in Privat 2001: 70-71, my translation). At least once a year Esperantujo counts on a temporary territory, in these pop-up capital cities that the congress venue provides. In the same way that these territorial links are temporary, relationships between Esperantists who meet at these events are also ephemeral in their own right. Despite some Esperantists exchanging contact details, most of these contacts are restricted to the spatial and temporal dimensions of the days these Esperantists spend in the international congresses – which configures ‘real’ Esperantujo, in Patrice’s words, as a pop-up
community. However, as I will show, rather than hampering the Esperanto community, the ephemerality and weak territoriality that characterises its instability is precisely what enables its existence and makes Esperanto attractive as a tool for community-building and network-formation.

Esperanto speakers and Esperantists may not be geographically concentrated, but their connections are, to a large extent, traceable. As indicated by the books and cardboard boxes travelling from Rotterdam to Seoul, congress attendances in Italy and in South Korea and denied Schengen visa applications, being an Esperantist in practice also means engaging with networks. These are made by members of Esperanto associations who meet regularly; by those who attend congresses, make friends, and exchange contact details; by those who communicate in Esperanto through online social networks and mobile phone apps, among others. In many ways, this community is established and evolves through a network-like organisation, in which the language itself is often the major mediator that prompts Esperanto associations, congresses, magazines, apps, and online social networks to play too an Esperanto-related mediating role. In this sense, mapping and retracing – or stabilising – some of the connections that compose this network seems to offer a potential way to explore Esperantujo.

Studying networks of Fijian-based NGOs dedicated to women’s issues, Riles (2000) formulates an interesting methodological remark: thinking of networks as an analytical tool is not innovative when the reality of one’s fieldwork is already based on networks. In her words,

> Where the people described in this book already understand themselves to create networks in order to generate realities by studying, analyzing or communicating about them, discovering a ‘network’ no longer can evoke the surprise of uncovering hidden analytical truth as it once did (2000: 4).

I was facing a similar issue among Esperantists: attempting to map connections, draw networks and identify mediators and actors was not an ingenious solution I was proposing for my analysis, but rather the very way in which this community is articulated. For this reason, my job was to identify connections encompassing people, places, and things that I could take as starting points for my study, which led me to look at some of the more institutionalised, stable and geographically situated actors in this network: the Esperanto associations. Forster (1982: Part 1) argues that
the fundamental spaces where the Esperanto community manifests itself are in its publications and meetings. Along these lines, the major roles played by Esperanto associations like UEA involve precisely publishing books and editing regular magazines, such as the ones being packed and dispatched from UEA’s office, and organised meetings like the Universal Congress of Esperanto. Against this background, being an active, fully-fledged Esperantist entails having access to these publications, being a member of associations and attending international meetings.

Aside from international Esperanto associations, there are also the abovementioned national and local associations and groups, responsible for promoting Esperanto to those who do not speak it – in this way, guiding the Esperanto movement – and for holding language courses, meetings and debates – to enact Esperanto at a national and local level. These are also the places from which many movements begin to gain relevance for Esperantists, as books, leaflets, magazines, CDs, DVDs, people, ideas, knowledge and information, among other things, are set in motion from stable locations such as UEA’s office. Nonetheless, not all Esperanto speakers engage with the language through the institutionalised framework of associations. Thus, in order to account for a wider variety of engagements, I took these associations as starting points from which I draw the networks in which I became enmeshed.

Due to the configuration of Esperanto and of the networks that form it, following people, things, metaphors, stories, lives and conflicts (cf. Marcus 1995) seemed to be the right thing to do. A multi-sited approach along these lines defies the more traditional practice of bounding ‘cultures’ into places (Marcus 1995: 104) and enables us to address issues that are not territorialised. Thus, instead of conducting a single-sited ethnography to be later situated into a broader context, multi-sitedness breaks the dichotomy between site and context. It gives more weight to the data coming from the field, rather than resorting to macrotheories to contextualise and provide explanations of the subjects closely observed by ethnographers. Therefore, multi-sitedness allows us to acknowledge that processes – such as the formation and maintenance of Esperanto – may take place across great distances and even on the move (Burrell 2009: 183).

I faced, then, another conundrum: once I start following actors, where should I stop following them – or, in other words, where should I cut the network? After all, as
Strathern notes in relation to kinship ties, ‘in practice one does not trace connexions forever’ (1996: 530). Strathern offers us some comfort by arguing that our objects of reflection are rendered stable during our reflection on them (1996: 522) – meaning that the writing of research outcomes is a way to stop the flows and to cut the network. Regarding cutting networks in the field, Candea (2010) encountered a similar issue. When starting his fieldwork from a village in Corsica, the village – which appeared to constitute a coherent entity, a stable and fairly obvious single field site – turned out to be the place from which many traces and flows started, which led him to assert that ‘the difficult thing was not so much to be multi-sited, as to be “sited” at all’ (2010: 16). Following Candea’s footsteps in an attempt to establish a location from which my long-term study would start, many factors directed me to Paris.

As we saw, at the time when the first international congress of Esperanto was held, in Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1905, France was on its way to becoming one of the most important places for Esperantists. In the beginning, many supporters of the language were from Eastern Europe, but the number of Esperantists increased rapidly in France in the late nineteenth century. However, as highlighted by Forster, ‘an idea originating in Russia and in accordance with Russian conditions was unlikely to make rapid impact on a society with the cultural prestige of France’ (1982: 75). Later, French Esperantists adapted the values attached to Esperanto to the French mindset by underplaying the interna ideo and its value orientation and by emphasising the scientific and practical use of the language. This move helped Esperanto to gain popularity mainly among French intellectuals, who saw this language as a contribution to the rationalisation of society.

France, especially Paris, became a hot spot for Esperantists from the early twentieth century onwards also because Esperantists in the country were among the first to endorse Zamenhof’s proposal to stabilise Esperantujo in territorial terms. This led to the foundation, in 1898, of the Société pour la propagation de l’espéranto (Society for the Dissemination of Esperanto, now called Espéranto France), the creation of the magazine L’Espérantiste, and the establishment of the international-driven Esperantista Centra Oficejo (Esperantist Central Office), in 1905. Years later, in 1933, SAT moved its headquarters from Leipzig to Paris, being followed, in 1945, by
the foundation of SAT-Amikaro, the association’s wing aimed at French-speaking members of SAT. For all these reasons, the French influence in the international Esperanto community and movement is discernible.\textsuperscript{21} The French weight yielded substantial influence of the French language over Esperanto vocabulary, as well as in early Esperanto literature, as Hachette was the first well-known publishing house to edit books in Esperanto and to advertise the language in its catalogue (Forster 1982: 79).

Esperanto also became a major matter of concern in the French diplomatic milieu, as the French attitude towards Esperanto at the League of Nations demonstrates. French was by then the official language of this organisation, along with English. When Esperanto was suggested as a language to be taught in public schools in the League’s member states, despite the support shown by ten delegates, as well as by Inazô Nitobe (then the Under-Secretary of the League), this proposal ended up being rejected by a single vote, from the French delegate (Nitobe 1998; Lins 2016: 50-53).

The passion with which some French defended Esperanto in heated debates, contrasted with a wider political and diplomatic dismissal of it within the country, made the controversies involving Esperanto in France go far beyond Esperantujo. These historical reasons, added to the diversity and significance of the Parisian, local enactment of Esperantujo, transformed this city into a major hub for Esperantists and, as a consequence, into my ‘arbitrary location’ (Candea 2007; 2010: Chapter 1).

1.6. On the move, in the making

The importance of Paris as a relevant hub in Esperantist networks continues until the present day, and the diversity of Esperantists in the city is largely expressed in its Esperanto associations. SAT and SAT-Amikaro (the latter standing for \textit{Union des Travailleurs Espérantistes de Langue Française}, Union of Esperantist French-speaking workers) still have their headquarters in the city. The Esperantist Central

\textsuperscript{21} The significance of this French influence is emphasised by scholars and Esperantists alike, being referred to as ‘the French period’ (Saladin 2017), ‘the French resurgence’ (Garvia 2015: 77-83), and ‘the French leadership of the Esperanto movement’ (Schor 2016: 89, Lins 2016: 24). It was also comprehensively described by Forster (1982: 74-109) as the ‘ideological conflict in France’.
Office merged with UEA and moved to Rotterdam, while the Society for the Dissemination of Esperanto remained in Paris, changing its name to Espéranto France. This association’s headquarters also host meetings of other associations, such as the relatively inactive Franca Katolika Esperanto-Asocio (FKEA, French Catholic Esperanto Association) and the Junulara Esperanta Franca Organizo (JEFO, French Youth Esperanto Organisation, also known as Espéranto Jeunes). From 1949, the Franca Fervoja Esperanto-Asocio (FFEA/AFCE, French Association of Esperanto Railway Workers) was added to this institutional plethora and, in 2003, the political party Europe Démocratie Espéranto (EDE, Europe-Democracy-Esperanto) adopted Paris as its official address.

The Esperantist networks in and from Paris also extend to non-Esperanto-related institutions. Some Paris-based Esperantists also managed to garner the official support of the association Citoyens du Monde (Citizens of the World); to establish collaboration with the association Amies et Amis de la Commune de Paris 1871 (Friends of the Paris Commune 1871) and with Mundolingua, the Parisian museum of languages and linguistics. Local Esperantists also hold a weekly Esperanto-French bilingual broadcast at Radio Libertaire (which is affiliated to the Fédération Anarchiste); offer a regular Esperanto course aimed at university students at the École normale supérieure; and participate weekly in the Parisian Café Polyglotte.22

In addition to these regular activities, Esperantists in Paris also hold stalls at events such as the Forum des Associations (Association’s Fair) held once a year in every Parisian district and at the annual Salon Européen de l’Éducation, as well as at the previously mentioned Fête de L’Humanité. Network-like Esperantujo also extends beyond institutional frameworks, especially with young Esperantists who hold occasional, informal meetings to practice the language in various places in Paris and beyond, extending the networks from Antony (Paris’ southern banlieues) and Versailles (banlieue Southwest of Paris) to Bondy (banlieue Northeast of Paris), covering the whole French department of Île-de-France. These networks are further stretched by communication technologies and online social networks, such as groups,

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22 Beyond Paris, in other parts of the country, some local and regional Esperanto associations invest in the teaching of Esperanto in French primary and elementary schools within the scope of the extracurricular activities proposed by the projects NAP and TAP (Nouvelles/Temps d’Activités Périscolaires). Similarly, Esperanto associations in the South of France and in Bretagne also support institutions that promote regional, minority languages, such as Breton in Bretagne and Occitan in the South.
pages, forums, and profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Meetup, Ipernity, Mastodon, and Reddit, as well as mobile phone apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Amikumu.

Setting Paris as my arbitrary location means moving away from the ideal-typical Esperantist previously presented and questioning the coherence of the Paris-based enactments of Esperantujo. The arbitrariness of Paris comes from it not being the capital city of Esperantujo nor offering a cohesive model of Esperantists. Focusing my ethnographic enquiry on Paris entails to engage with the diversity of this network-like community and its arbitrarily delineated relation to territory. From Paris, I explore continuities and discontinuities, interweavings and ruptures of these people, places and things held together (Candea 2010: 33-34) – I being the actor that connects actors in this network in one among many possible ways.

Just like money, magazines, books and cardboard boxes, Esperantists also circulate and travel, especially to attend Esperanto courses, meetings and international congresses outside the city, the country and the continent. Despite being based in Paris, I was pushed outside the city all too frequently, being constantly invited to join these flows, through offers that I, as an ethnographer of Esperantujo, could hardly refuse. At some point, circulating became an analytical imperative and, following from this, I spent a month at the previously described headquarters of UEA (The Netherlands), which is one of the largest hubs of everything and everyone who circulates within this community, as well as among the most well-known mediators connected to Esperanto. I also attended international Esperanto meetings and congresses in 2016 and in 2017, travelling to the British Esperanto Conference in the United Kingdom, to the Internationalist Meeting in Catalonia/Spain, to the Congresses of SAT held in Germany and in South Korea, and to the Universal Congresses of Esperanto in Slovakia and in South Korea. Circulating, thus, opened up a rethinking in terms of location and territory: as suggested by Clifford (1992), relations of dwelling and of travelling, being there and getting there are constitutive elements of travelling cultures – like those of active Esperantists.

The establishment of a core arbitrary location, therefore, did not prevent circulation. Even within Paris, I was in constant motion, having maps and the Parisian public transportation system as my best friends. In my attempts to follow the native, in the strict sense of the expression, I followed people, things, ideas and practices –
however, the curious detail here is that these natives were not native speakers of Esperanto. Thus, maybe following the non-native would be the most suitable expression to denote what this ethnographic approach entails.

Nonetheless, engaging with Esperanto involves not only circulating, but also making things circulate. It is not exactly making actors do things (Latour 2005: 216-218), but it is not far from this idea, as what is at stake here is to make actors move. This endeavour would not be complete without occasions in which the anthropologist himself was made to circulate. As a foreign Esperantist, I was invited, on behalf of Espéranto France, to go on tour: over the course of one month, I visited fifteen local Esperanto clubs and associations all over the French continental territory, giving talks about anthropology and about my country of origin, being hosted by local Esperantists and having my travel expenses covered by the national and local Esperanto associations. Just like the cardboard boxes that are made to circulate from Rotterdam to many places around the globe, I was put into motion and introduced into the network during this Tour de France, from Paris to other parts of the country, being once more led to embrace circulation as a practice as an Esperantist and as a methodology as an anthropologist. I was in the Kula Ring this time (Malinowski 1922), as it were, as the object being exchanged between groups. Instead of boats, trains; instead of islands and villages, cities and Esperanto associations. However, the ceremonial exchange was there – one group bringing me safely to the next and passing me on to the following one in a sometimes rather festive and ceremonial way – taking place right before my eyes, and I was the valuable being traded.

In spite of having these first-hand experiences as an Esperantist on the move, in the making, at some point the trip had to come to an end. As Hage (2005: 465) remarks, ‘the body of the anthropologist, even a post-modern one, simply cannot cope with such fast and intensive travelling for a very lengthy period of time’. Issues such as physical exhaustion and restrictions in terms of time and financial resources, as well as the lack of regular and long-term contact with the same interlocutors, are factors that necessarily play a role in the process of interrupting the movement and cutting the network. These factors equally affect Esperantists, as much as anthropologists. See, for instance, Andrei’s assertion, during our preparation of the cardboard boxes, that some people are prevented from attending Universal Congresses due to their
difficulties in dealing with different weather conditions, foreign food habits, and with the long time spent waiting in airports and travelling – or, as Julien stressed, due to problems in obtaining visas. The same happens to CDs and DVDs that are prevented from travelling as a consequence of the high taxes imposed on their circulation. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the same actors and connections that enable movement also set its pace and offer some resistance to it, both facilitating and impeding mobility (Cresswell 2014). Travel documents and means of transportation may make travelling possible, but not always and not for everyone, as lack of visas, lack of money, long waits in airports and high taxes also restrain flows.

Despite frequently supporting a set of cosmopolitan principles, Esperantists are also rooted somewhere – and part of my ethnographic strategy included being partially stuck with them. This enabled me to better grasp their local practices in Paris, as well as their lack of Esperanto-related activities in moments when they could not attend meetings outside the city – on occasions in which their mobility is expressed as motility, as a potential of movement that may not be effectively carried out (Salazar 2014: 58-59). Just as with the African Esperantists who had their visa applications to attend the Esperanto festival in Italy refused, I also had an issue regarding passports. As a Brazilian national with a single citizenship, I had to apply for a resident permit to stay in the Schengen area for the length of my fieldwork, and I was similarly submitted to bureaucratic barriers that prevented my constant mobility. In this situation, sharing part of this sense of entrapment (Jansen 2009a: 818), rather than being a setback, came to be an essential part of my approach.

Yet, when it comes to Esperantists who cannot go to real Esperantujo whenever it pops up, Esperantujo may still come to them. This is where hospitality plays a major role. I also experienced this in my one-month-long Tour de France and in my whole stay in Paris. During my thirteen-month-long fieldwork I was hosted – paying cheap rent for Parisian standards – by two Esperantists and their families, using Esperanto regularly as a home language. Although I was incorporated into their families during my stay, it is worth pointing out the temporal issues at stake: since hospitality is based on the premise that one’s role as a guest is always temporally limited, the guest’s departure in a near future is always kept in mind (Pitt-Rivers 2012: 516).
There is also another obstacle that I had to take into account: the so-called ‘language problem’, so significant for our discussion on international communication. Code-switching is a constitutive part of the practice of being an Esperantist. Once Esperantujo is fully enacted, Esperanto would abolish the constant need for translation, since everyone could communicate in this language. However, in order to reach this state, everything has to be translated into Esperanto – in this case, mostly from French. For me the issue was slightly more radical, since I had to switch, on a daily basis, between Portuguese (my mother tongue), English (the language in which I was writing my field notes and, later, my thesis), French (the first language of most of my interlocutors, as well as the official language where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork), and Esperanto (the mediator that brought my interlocutors together). My field research was conducted in both Esperanto and French, and even though I could already speak the languages I needed for this study, my foreignness – my being a(n) (South) American in Paris – played a role in these encounters. My fluent, although far from standard, French, together with my fluent, ‘international’, Esperanto, made the very process of code-switching a relevant component of my data collection. As Patrice (quoted above) stated, my foreignness rendered the use of Esperanto ‘less artificial’, which encouraged some Esperantists to want to talk to me. On the other hand, when I spoke in French, those who were beginners in Esperanto felt more comfortable to talk to me – and constantly switching from one code to another enabled me to approach a wider range of interlocutors.

It is worth pointing out that anyone who wants to conduct ethnographic research about Esperanto has to be, to some extent, an Esperantist, since such studies require speaking the language and engaging with this community. In some cases, I was seen as a ‘very active Esperantist’: I attended several Esperanto classes, debates, meetings and congresses, was given copies of the keys of some associations’ headquarters, and, on a couple of occasions, was even invited to play leading administrative roles in one of these associations (to which I refused), due to my

23 Cramer undertook a historical analysis of some aspects of the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement ‘without being an Esperantist’ (2005: 6) – meaning she did not master the language. Consequently, she was not able to access most of the historical sources, originally written in Esperanto, and had to rely on the help of French Esperantists who translated some documents for her. Moreover, most of the academic bibliography on Interlinguistics and planned languages is in Esperanto (Barandovská-Frank 1995: 9), which, once again, creates barriers for scholars who conduct Esperanto-related research but do not speak the language.
constant presence at their meetings, which was read as an active engagement. This perspective was clearly expressed by Andra, a 25-year-old Esperantist who lived in Toulouse and who was my guest during her three-day stay in Paris: ‘you are a real Esperantist, you’re so involved and so participative within these associations!’ Since she understood the purposes of my research, I replied: ‘Yes, but it’s mostly because of my fieldwork, it’s not something I do as part of a broader engagement with Esperanto’. She retorted:

But you’re always meeting them, joining debates, attending these administrative meetings. You see tonight, for instance: we only met young Esperantists at a restaurant because you set up the meeting, got in touch with them, and invited them to go there to welcome me to Paris. Without you, maybe Thomas [one of the participants at this meeting, a Parisian who had joined the Paris-based young Esperantists for the first time] would never have met other Esperantists in Paris. You are the one who included him.

Andra was right. Although I tended to regard myself simply as an Esperanto speaker – since I never tried to convince people to learn the language – my fieldwork placed me at the heart of Esperantujo. I was completely imbricated in the community, and I was even held responsible for helping to establish the network that I was trying to trace. If this is what being an Esperantist meant, then speaking the language, circulating and building connections in this network had made me into one.

In sum, travelling and encountering Esperanto speakers from different language backgrounds is paramount for this community. However, the mild Esperantist way of ‘dwelling-in-travelling’ (Clifford 1992) bears no relation to practices of mobility oriented towards migration or towards a permanent displacement. Instead, it concerns continuous practices of communicating in Esperanto that establish episodic enactments of Esperantujo at the local, national or global scale. Such enactments constitute this one-night-stand community as a pop-up one that is always moving, being continuously recreated and renovated by new Esperanto-mediated connections. Funnily enough, as I was establishing an arbitrary location, I was being pushed to join flows and to embrace multi-sitedness. Hence, my initial interrogations about methodology and my ethnographic issues turned out to be the same as the ones that Esperantists face: when getting to grips with my positionality, circulating and being partially trapped revealed to be at the core of the very process of becoming both an anthropologist studying Esperantists and an Esperantist.
Yet, in a way, my methodology partially clashed with the practices I was mapping: as my interlocutors worked to enlarge their Esperantist networks, I attempted to abridge mine as I tried to stabilise the ever-unstable Esperantujo through cutting networks and writing up the outcomes of my study. But, as Idris, one of my Paris-based informants, said: ‘Sometimes Esperanto offers us so many opportunities. Maybe in your case it couldn’t be otherwise, because Esperanto led you to go to all these places and do all these things’. Locating Esperantujo meant being dislocated by it, which compelled me to become quite an active actor in this network-like community – both in Paris-based associations and in international congresses, as we will see in the next chapter.
I don't understand you
But I want you to know
Same, we're both the same
We share the same heart
We're made of the same parts
(Dear Reader, excerpt from *The same.*
From the album *Replace why with funny,* 2009)

As we saw in the previous chapter, Esperanto was designed to connect and to mediate between its speakers internationally. Since speaking it often entails travelling and circulating, the act of engaging with Esperanto in practice implies, to a large extent, encountering certain kinds of Others, from different backgrounds. This raises a set of questions: if being part of Esperantujo is mostly about communicating verbally, what is to be communicated when Esperantists meet? What can – and what cannot – be shared once they gather? To what extent is a fellow Esperantist seen as a fellow or as an Other?

From an ethnographic account of the 101st Universal Congress of Esperanto, which took place in Slovakia in 2016, this chapter will analyse how certain understandings of difference emerged historically among Esperantists, revolving around particular conceptions of nationality, humanism, non-nationalism, internationalism, and cosmopolitanism, and how Esperantists enact them in practice. If the Other at stake among Esperantists is, preferably, someone from a different language background, the notion of otherness at the heart of Esperanto also foregrounds differences concerning nationality and culture. In this way, language, nationality and culture are linked to a certain conception of openness and intertwined in very elaborate ways.

The use of Esperanto to mediate between people in highly international Esperanto meetings (such as the annual Universal Congresses) set the frame wherein cosmopolitan sociabilities take centre stage. By particularly welcoming linguistic, national and cultural differences, the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto direct
the making of Esperantujo to be based on internationality. However, once Esperantists set up a grammar of differences to be addressed and celebrated, they also institute differences – such as those expressed as strangeness and eccentricity – that will be placed at the margins of this community.

I argue that encountering some kinds of Others and celebrating their differences is what drives many people’s engagements with this language and constitutes one of the core Esperanto-related practices. Thus, looking at international Esperanto meetings, if the togetherness of this community is ephemeral and not geographically bounded, how can it be stabilised and rendered long-lasting beyond these episodic enactments? How is Esperanto’s cosmopolitanism anchored in ways of dealing with difference and how do Esperantists juggle diversity and strangeness in practice?

2.1. Countries without queens, can you imagine?

Nitra, late July 2016. It was a Monday, the third day of that year’s Universal Congress of Esperanto. Since these Universal Congresses are non-academic, aimed at creating a space for many subjects to be discussed in Esperanto, their programme includes many talks, presentations, workshops, group dynamics, concerts, and games taking place simultaneously, as a way to welcome and to make every member of Esperantujo feel included. Attending one activity at these congresses means being unable to attend several others. This also gives the impression that the dynamics in play are always fast-paced, with people often moving quickly from one session to the other, to make the most of them, and also meeting friends and acquaintances in the corridors between the rooms in the congress venue – which, in this case, was the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra.

The first activity I chose to attend was called Social justice: what to do in practice? The title was in Esperanto, as every talk and activity, as well as everything else in the congress and in the venue, including the signs in the corridors indicating where rooms and toilets were located. This debate on social justice was chaired by a middle-aged German woman. She first collected the names and home countries of
the forty people in the audience, and then discussed the idea of social justice by relating it to struggles against sexism and racism. The audience actively participated in the discussion and three young women were especially interested in the topic, raising issues about feminism and defending women’s rights.

The participants discussed how women have lower salaries in comparison with men and how some jobs, such as primary school teaching, are based on expectations regarding gender roles, being almost exclusively for women. Some people in the audience talked about their countries of origin, discussing discrimination against homosexuals and women in Chile, Brazil, China, Finland, and France. Then, the chairwoman presented the home page of Pasporta Servo and debated the image of the sleeping woman on the sofa that featured on the website [Figure 6]. She drew people’s attention to what she referred to as ‘the sexist features’ of the image: it shows a beautiful, white, European-like woman who is sleeping comfortably. Why not a man? Why not an older woman? Why not someone who is not white? According to her, the image of the Sleeping Beauty was used to merchandise products, as usual. The same applied, in her view, to a picture on UEA’s website, of an African man, a Nepalese woman, and another woman holding the Brazilian flag [Figure 7]: although aiming to highlight the diversity of the Esperantists, this picture, she stated, was exoticising differences.

Fig. 6: Image of the ‘sleeping beauty’ followed by the sentence, in Esperanto: ‘Find a place to stay anywhere on the planet’. This image, however, is not on the updated version of Pasporta Servo’s website [Source: website PasportaServo.org, retrieved November 2017].

Fig. 7: Picture that was said to exoticise differences, in UEA’s home page [Source: website UEA.org, retrieved January 2018].
At the end of the debate, one of the participants asked: ‘what can we do, as Esperanto movement, to act against racism?’ Eduardo, one of the members of the board of directors of UEA, replied:

We can continue existing as a movement! I’m against finvenkismo\textsuperscript{24} because they say that someday we are going to reach a fairer and better world with the help of Esperanto and that, until that day, all we do is to struggle to reach this goal. But actually we, as a movement, make a difference already. We are here, openly discussing these subjects, and this is already something.

A lady in the front row showed her dissatisfaction with this:

I’ve been attending Esperanto meetings for years, and I have the impression that we always talk about peace, tolerance and other things, but only theoretically. We don’t do anything concrete for them.

The debate went on, with some people supporting the lady’s arguments and others trying to illustrate concrete achievements that Esperantists and Esperanto associations attained in support for social justice.

After some time, the debate came to an end and I went to another room, for a presentation called \textit{Introduction to the UN}, given by Kenneth, the main representative of UEA within the United Nations in New York. His talk was well attended and, after providing an overview of the structure of the UN, he talked mostly about language diversity and language policies in national and international organisations:

The more difficult the language policy, the less efficient the policy. In South Africa, there were two official languages: Afrikaans and English. At some point, the government decided to give visibility to other languages and to accept ten working languages. It made it impossible to communicate in the governmental sphere, which led English to become widely spoken and to reduce the importance of all the other languages, including Afrikaans. […] Among the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the UN, there are seventeen targets to be addressed, but none of them refers to language. Language discrimination is as serious as other forms of discrimination.

An elderly man in the audience raised his hand and asked: ‘there have already been 101 Universal Congresses of Esperanto, there are official relations between UEA and

\textsuperscript{24}Finvenkismo refers to those Esperantists who advocate for the \textit{fina venko} (the final victory), meaning an ideal moment in time when Esperanto would be widespread enough to be used as a de facto world language. Even though some Esperantists aspire to the spread of Esperanto along these lines, those who identify with this orientation – called \textit{finvenkistoj} – are a minority in Esperantujo.
the UN, but it seems that Esperanto plays no role in these international organisations.

Why?” Kenneth replied:

You’re totally right, Esperanto plays no role at all. Of course I don’t have an answer to this question, otherwise the world would be different. But, as I said, people in the UN don’t see language and communication problems as a problem. We may have the solution, but a solution for what, if they don’t think there’s a problem? One must first show the language problem exists, and then convince them to include languages as one of the issues to be tackled in the Sustainable Development Goals, and later indicate that Esperanto could play a role in it. I believe it never happened because we [Esperantists] usually don’t know how to promote Esperanto and how to raise awareness about these issues. Many Esperantists meet people randomly in the streets and give them a leaflet, saying ‘Here’s Esperanto, a language to solve all the problems in the world’. It’s not efficient to offer a solution to a problem people don’t think they have. First, we have to show that some people can’t communicate with others and that this is a real problem, to show that English is not as widespread as we think, and then we can argue that Esperanto can make international communication easier.

Eduardo intervened:

I think Esperanto is far from having a real role in these international organisations, and maybe it’ll never have one. If it happens one day, it won’t be in our lifetime, not even in our grandchildren’s lifetime. But it doesn’t matter to me. For me, Esperanto is an everyday achievement. It doesn’t matter whether these central bodies will accept Esperanto or not: we can make it real on a small scale. I think Esperanto is something that comes from below, from inside, and then materialises in people’s lives.

After a few more comments and questions, we all left the room for the lunch break, since the afternoon presentations, excursions and debates would start in an hour. I had lunch with two young women from Romania I had met the day before. As usual, our engagement with Esperanto was the starting point of the conversation – not because this is essential for Esperantists in general, but because this is the common ground that we share upfront, from which other commonalities and interests come to be raised. When they found out my nationality, one of them, Alina, told me about her experiences when she travelled to Brazil and met Esperantists there:

I had the impression that Esperantists in Brazil were quite *finvenkistoj*, always talking about Esperanto to everyone. Also, in Brazil, many of the Esperantists I met were Spiritists, some vegetarians, and I think it’s not like this in Europe. And the youth Esperanto group in Rio de Janeiro was really cool. However, sometimes I had the impression that I was being used by some Esperantists there [laughed], because whenever I attended Esperanto meetings or classes, they wanted me to talk about
Romania, to dress like a Romanian and to speak Esperanto all the time. They wanted to show like: ‘Look, we have a Romanian here, and she came to speak Esperanto with us!’ Sometimes I wanted to speak Portuguese, because I like Portuguese and I was more fluent in this language than in Esperanto then, but they asked me to speak only in Esperanto because I was a foreigner. They wanted to show to their Esperanto students and friends that this language really works in practice to communicate with people from other countries; to show them that they could communicate with me thanks to Esperanto.

I was interested in the role her nationality played and asked Alina questions about this, to which she replied with another story:

When I became a member of UEA, I paid the membership fee, as everybody does, and right after that I received an email from a guy saying that he is Romanian and that he works in UEA’s bookshop. If he wasn’t an Esperantist, I would find it very weird; a stranger randomly contacting me only because we’re both Romanians. But since he’s an Esperantist, I found it normal, because Esperantists usually want to establish contact, to meet other Esperantists, and they are usually nice people, so I talked to him and explained that I was born in Romania but I started learning the language after moving to Belgium, not in Romania.

We finished lunch, and when I was checking the congress programme, to choose which activity I was going to attend next, I came across Gareth, an Esperantist I had met a couple of months earlier at the British Esperanto Conference. Gareth, a retired judge and, at the time, mayor of a town in Wales, seemed to be very enthusiastic about meeting me again. He said: ‘if you have some free time, come with me, let’s walk around for a while and I’ll introduce you to some people who can help you with your research’. Having attended Universal Congresses for many years, he knew many Esperantists, and we quickly bumped into some of his old friends. We encountered an elderly Portuguese man, who was one of the coordinators of the Esperanto Law Association. After introducing us, Gareth told me, pointing at the man: ‘the Esperanto movement in Portugal is not very strong, but he is one of the most important people there’. We said goodbye to the man, and Gareth and I continued walking. He then introduced me to the treasurer of UEA, who was at the reception of the congress venue. She asked about my research and seemed to be interested in it. Gareth pointed at me and told her: ‘don’t forget his face! You’re going to meet him again very soon!’ We kept walking along the corridors of the venue, and he kept introducing me to other people: an Italian lady who was the president of the Italian Esperanto Federation, an Indian couple, and a Slovakian man.
As we approached the Slovakian Esperantist, it seemed that he was busy listening to the complaints of his wife, who was angry about the results of a polemic on international law they had discussed at the previous meeting of the Law Association. Gareth told me: ‘it seems that they’re not available now, but try to talk to this guy later! He knew Lapenna personally and could be an interesting source of information for you!’

After this twenty-minute fast-paced walk with Gareth, which seemed like a series of speed meetings – in which a person has just a few minutes to meet another one quickly, introduce oneself, ask one or two questions, and move on – we finally settled down. Gareth would chair the debate to be held by SAT, and we had coffee together before going to the debate room. He said he knew a lot of people because he had been taking part in these congresses for many years. Then, I asked him: ‘when did you start studying Esperanto?’, which opened up to the most interesting part of our conversation, about his pristine, maybe idealised, pre-Esperanto mindset:

I started studying it in 1967, when I was 17 years old. My father spoke it, but he had already passed away when I decided to learn it. I knew about the existence of Esperanto, but actually I decided to study it because I wanted to communicate with people behind the Iron Curtain that separated the socialist countries from the other side of Europe. And thanks to Esperanto I learned a lot of things. Can you believe that, before that, I never imagined that there were countries without queens? For me, it was unbelievable, and I was completely surprised when I found out about this! I thought: ‘How come these people live without a queen? How is it possible?’ I had never given it a thought before this moment… […] I also learned about homosexuals for the first time because of Esperanto. Before that, I had already heard about homosexuality, but my contact with Esperantists [from other countries] put me in touch with them, and it showed me that they are not a threat to me. In the beginning, based on the prejudices in my town, I thought they could be dangerous, but of course they aren’t, and I learned this because of Esperanto.

We continued chatting, and he talked about his personal engagement with Esperanto:

There are many ways of being an Esperantist. Some people promote the language, attract people to Esperanto, or even work as office workers at UEA, and others read books, go to congresses, use Esperanto to travel and to talk to people… There’s this difference between movadano [member of the movement] and komunumano [member of the community]. Both are equally Esperantists, but some are more interested in promoting the language, while others are more interested in being part of the community.
Then, we arrived at the room where SAT’s presentation and debate were going to take place. As we went in, a man in his sixties called Juan Carlos came to chat with us. During our conversation, Gareth decided to restart his speed-meeting practice by introducing me to him: ‘Let me introduce you to Guilherme. He’s Brazilian and honorary British – although I’m not sure if being British is something honourable’. We laughed and Juan Carlos said:

My country of origin is a neighbour of yours. I was born in Argentina, but then I moved to the US around 35 years ago. [...] Some people move to another place, but their minds stay in their countries of origin. That’s what happened to my brother, for example.

I asked him: ‘and what about you? Is your mind in Argentina or in the US?’ and he replied: ‘it’s anywhere. I’m a mondcivitano (citizen of the world)’.

Gareth started the presentation, introducing SAT to the audience, talking about the importance of supporting associations and political parties as a way of backing and promoting ideas. He also highlighted that SAT intends to work as a forum through which Esperantists can manifest their political perspectives, debate and exchange ideas:

In the opening ceremony of a previous SAT congress, someone said ‘Bonvenon, malsamideanoj’ ['Welcome, non-fellow thinkers’, a wordplay in relation to UEA’s conception of samideano, fellow thinker]. And that’s what we are: malsamideanoj. We have different opinions, and here we have a space to discuss these opinions.

At the end of the debate, Anthony, a middle-aged Esperantist from Southern England that both Gareth and I knew beforehand, raised his hand and, stammering and conveying some difficulties to express himself, made a comment that was not relevant to what was being said. Before leaving the room, Gareth came to me and said:

Anthony is an eterna komencanto [eternal beginner].25 He has been studying Esperanto for years and seems to understand everything we say, but then he says something that makes us realise that, actually, he didn’t really follow us.

I said goodbye to Gareth and went to a meeting of the Internacia Fervojista Esperanto-Federacio (IFEF, International Federation of Esperanto Railway

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25 Okrent (2009: 113) asserts that ‘eternal beginner’ is among the idiomatic expressions that are exclusive to Esperantujo. An eternal beginner is someone who cannot express oneself fully in Esperanto despite having studied it and attended Esperanto meetings for years.
Workers). I had not yet come across railway workers who spoke Esperanto, and was curious about what they would discuss at such a congress. Yet, no matter how good their meeting might have been, I am unable to give an account of it because of all the technicalities they debated. The five-minute introduction to IFEF, made by its president, was followed by three short talks, with time for questions and answers, about railways and trains, mainly in Slovakia. However, the presentations were very technical, about the inclination of railways, the horsepower, speed limits and models of trains, as well as about plans for the modernisation of tracks, in a very elaborate professional jargon that I would not have been able to grasp even in my mother tongue.

At the end of that day, there was a concert by the young German singer Kašita Kaši, attended by many of the congress participants. He sang both original and cover songs, including an Esperanto version of The Beatles’ *Hey Jude*. After many songs in Esperanto, as he was about to sing one in English, he introduced it by saying: ‘the next song will be in English… the forbidden language… [imitating an evil laugh] No, I’m just kidding!’, to which the audience also laughed. During the concert, apart from those who were dancing and singing along, there were also people chatting and, at some point, Agata, a 35-year-old Polish woman, came to talk to me. She introduced herself, asked where I was from, and enthusiastic talked about the forthcoming 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, after learning that this was the city where I was born.

When the conversation came to an end, I went back to my room, to type my field notes and to get prepared for more debates, presentations and concerts in the following days. Apart from being exhausted due to attending all these events and due to the constant coming and going from one room to another, I was still amazed at being so immersed in Esperantujo and at having a day of my life entirely held in Esperanto, which would so far have sounded unrealistic to me. In addition to thinking about the multiplicity of topics being debated at the congress, I kept recalling the role played by people’s nationalities in starting conversations and in setting the grounds for the exchanges to take place whenever I was introduced to or came across someone new. As I came to understand later, nationality and countries
of origin do play a central role in what bond Esperantists and turn them into members of Esperantujo as a community, as I will analyse now.

2.2. The making of a community

On a normal day at a Universal Congress of Esperanto, most people meet and start conversations as a way of making friends, practising the language, including themselves in this community, and of learning, sharing and exchanging ideas and experiences. As we saw in my conversation with Alina over lunch, talking about Esperanto frequently provides the metalinguistic ground that ‘sets the frame’ of an Esperanto meeting. Accordingly, when we do not already know each other, our interests regarding Esperanto stand out as our basic common ground, being, therefore, a topic often used as an ice breaker to establish initial small talk. As this clearly shows, the most evident element that the participants of one of these Esperanto meetings share is the language. This is, then, the first feature that brings Esperantujo into being.

As a language, Esperanto is to be kept under control, with its use regulated and its forms of speech, standardised, so that it can be ‘international enough’ and thus understood by Esperanto speakers from different parts of the world. In this regard, aside from the initial booklet that launched Esperanto, a detailed description of the basis of the language and most of its initial vocabulary are registered in the *Fundamento de Esperanto* (Zamenhof 1963 [1905]). Moreover, the symbolic power to control linguistic differences and language variation in Esperanto lies in the *Akademio de Esperanto*. Just as the *Académie Française*, but without holding the same power, the Akademio is responsible for overseeing the evolution of the language. Another tool in this sense is the early translations of books from other languages into Esperanto (some of them being translated by Zamenhof himself), as well as dictionaries, particularly the *Plena Ilustrita Vortaro de Esperanto* (PIV, the monolingual *Complete Illustrated Dictionary of Esperanto*, edited by SAT). The PIV is where most of the officially accepted and the most frequently used vocabulary in
Esperanto is registered and defined – even though ‘officially accepted’ and ‘most frequently used’ may not always coincide.

In this regard, Fiedler (2006) nicely shows how standardisation and self-regulation take place among Esperanto speakers. Faced with the previously described absence of native speakers whose competence decides on the language standards, Esperanto is more exposed to self-regulation characterised by tensions between diversifying forces (the different national and language backgrounds of its speakers) and unifying forces (the use of the language in international meetings and written publications). In this sense, language varieties in Esperanto are strongly marked by the influence of its speakers’ mother tongues (as discussed later in this chapter) and by humorous and playful uses of the language, mostly in literature – particularly in poetry – and in how young Esperanto speakers wordplay (as presented in Chapter 4).

However, once we have acknowledged that Esperantists share the language, what else do they share that entitles them to claim to be forming a fully-fledged community? What do they speak about when they speak Esperanto, when a conversation becomes more than a small talk and lasts longer than a speed meeting? Aside from the language, are there other elements that hold Esperantujo together?

One feature, developed since the early days of this language, to stabilise this community and to give visibility to Esperanto is the design and adoption of a common grammar and a visual language. These include symbols that represent the language and its community (the green five-pointed star, standing for the five continents, and the green Esperanto Jubilee symbol, representing the Latin and the Cyrillic alphabets and expressing the rapprochement of the West and the East), a colour (green, to represent the hope of mutual understanding), and a flag (a green background with a white square in the upper-left containing the green star) [Figure 8]. Esperanto and Esperantujo also have an anthem (called La Espero, or The Hope) and a founding father (Zamenhof, whose images and statues are scattered around many places throughout the world). There are also days of celebration, such as Zamenhof’s birthday (the 15th of December, Zamenhof Day) and Esperanto’s birthdate, when the publication of the First Book was authorised by the Russian Empire’s censors (the 26th of July, Esperanto Day). Esperantists and Esperanto
speakers often display these symbols on occasions such as congresses, meetings and trips abroad, so that they can be recognised by fellow Esperanto speakers.

Fig. 8: The Esperanto flag and the Jubilee symbol [Source: images in the public domain, retrieved February 2018].

Aside from linguistic and symbolic features, the building of this community also comprises a shared knowledge about the history of Esperanto. As historians such as Renan (1990) note, nation-building cannot rely only on elements such as common interests and a geographical territory. In Renan’s perspective, a nation is grounded on a common history, which serves as a base for a collective identity and for people’s interest in coming together and remaining as parts of the same unity. Following from Renan’s arguments, Hobsbawm (2000, 2012) states that the common past that a people share is often based on retrospective mythologies (2012: 255).\(^{26}\) These are constituted by invented traditions and built upon great events and national heroes, being regularly recalled by symbols and celebrations – such as the previously mentioned flag, anthem, celebration days and founding father. Also commenting on nations and nationalisms, Anderson (2006) defines nations as ‘imagined political communities’ (2006: 5-6), which are imagined and formed by people who perceive themselves to be part of that group regardless of the fact that, for practical reasons, their community can never be based on face-to-face interactions among all its members. Accordingly, a nation – as any other imagined community, in which we could include Esperantujo – is based on the ideas people hold about its existence and on some interests and identity traits shared by its members. As I argue elsewhere

\(^{26}\) As an example of retrospective mythology, the burning of Zamenhof’s first written version of the language by his father is narrated by some of Zamenhof’s biographers (such as Privat 2001: 31), but not by others (for example, Korzhenkov 2010). The narrative of this event is occasionally seen as a means of emphasising the heroism and persistence of the creator of Esperanto without being based on real facts (Kolker 2005: 193-195).
(Fians 2012), Esperanto’s cosmopolitanism is largely grounded in arguments, visual language, grammars and recollections of the past akin to those used by nationalisms.\(^27\) However, even though visual language, dates and ‘national heroes’ play a role in materialising and expressing people’s allegiance to Esperanto, these elements are far from enough to sustain Esperantujo.

An element that seems to play a significant role in establishing this community is what Esperantists refer to as Esperanto-kulturo (Esperanto culture). This culture lays claims to internationality by being grounded on underlying ideas of nationality, so as to justify Esperantujo’s attempts to create international settings through bringing people from different nationalities together. As we saw in the narration of a day at the Universal Congress, being Brazilian or Romanian in an Esperanto setting places people into categories in a way that is seen as positive. Accordingly, Esperantists’ national origins attract the attention of others, enabling the fellow Esperantist who is a national other to discover new nationalities through the eyes of Brazilians’ and Romanians’ experiences in and about their own countries. By the same token, difference is imposed on the national other, who is expected to have different perspectives and backgrounds to share with their Others.

This concept of difference in national form recalls a Romantic definition of culture, as a discrete and partially bounded unity attached to a nation. Eriksen (2001: 137) calls it ‘the Herderian archipelago vision’, according to which cultures – including languages – are carriers of national characters and an integral part of someone’s nationality. Although this perspective may be considered modern and outdated in terms of anthropological theory,\(^28\) this is in accordance with the philosophical and political programme behind Esperanto and its definition of culture: if national

\(^27\) When discussing nationalism and internationalism, Malkki (1994) and Fardon (2008) argue that these are not antagonistic, but rather complementary, reinforcing and legitimising each other. By the same token, a similar case can be made about the Esperanto movement, which, as with many other transnational political and social movements (see Smith 2004), reiterate in many ways the dynamics and basis of national social movements.

\(^28\) Stocking (1992: 347) suggests that the history of anthropology unfolds as a tension between Enlightenment (the universalism of anthropos) and Romantic impulses (the diversitarianism of ethnos). In comparing Esperanto and anthropology, Heller (2017) affirms that both mobilise the same two sets of historically held ideas about ways of dealing with difference when trying to imagine alternative worlds. In Heller’s words: ‘either we think we will solve human problems by finding a way to communicate clearly across difference, or we think we will do so by embracing the incommensurability of difference. Sometimes, we think both are true at once’ (2017: 13).
cultures can be used to set peoples apart, an international culture would be a tool to help bring peoples together.

Continuing to draw parallels between the Herderian and the Esperantist outlooks to culture, I argue that both approaches consider that languages are conveyed as constitutive components of cultures, and cultures are equated to nationalities, making room for a slip through which someone from a different language background is presented as a national other. Additionally, one’s country of origin is often associated to nationality and presented as the label that distinguishes national others – such as ‘the Brazilian’ and ‘the Romanian’ mentioned above. The interplay of language, nationality, culture and country of origin that eventually collapses these notions certainly brings controversies, as the boundaries between states, nations and, likewise, languages, do not necessarily overlap (Eriksen 1992: 314). The implicit notion of culture in play does not fully account for multilingual countries, such as India or Belgium and, similarly, Catalan speakers and Spanish speakers from Spain may not equally identify themselves with the label ‘Spanish people’, to mention just a few examples. However, these controversies and (non)definitions, rather than constituting a problem, produce the very framework in which exchanges with national others take place. Calling someone’s national label into question – for example, when Gareth jokingly referred to me as both ‘Brazilian’ and ‘honorary British’, alluding to my country of birth and my country of residence – may provide the first step towards a meaningful conversation and an exchange about differences.

In this way, encounters in international Esperanto meetings frequently revolve around a very Herderian notion of culture. When establishing some cultures as Other’s cultures, Esperantists build certain conceptions of Us and Them, rendering difference – enacted positively as diversity – visible and significant. These dynamics of placing diversity under the spotlight also entails that these cultures are depicted as both recognisable and stereotyped. Esperantists take for granted that different cultures exist, and often impose national otherness on someone, through holding certain expectations about an essentialist view of these cultures, which are to be performed and reified through music, clothing, traditional values and habits. However, in imposing and expecting displays of national otherness, Esperantists also
know that these cultures may not be exactly as these Esperantists previously imagined them.

As the continuation of this process, in building an Esperanto culture from this diversity, Esperantists draw a line between national cultures so that they can later cross the line and overcome this divide. Paraphrasing Wagner (1975: 14), in the act of inventing another culture, Esperantists invent their own, and in fact they reinvent (or, in this case, establish) their working notion of culture itself. In taking for granted that nationally bounded cultures exist (preferably, corresponding to countries of origin), Esperantists also establish the basis upon which an Esperanto culture can be built, constructed from elements of many other cultures, as an outcome of internationalism and multiculturalism. An invented culture for an invented language: ironically enough, it sounds appropriate.

Although Esperantists may compare the Esperanto culture with cultures bound up with nations, this comparison has limits, since the former may not be as encompassing. There is no traditional Esperantist food (unlike essentialised ideas of what is traditional Korean or French food, for instance), just as there is no standard etiquette expected from Esperantists at the table or in a queue to take a bus. Nonetheless, a common example given by Esperantists to illustrate this culture is artistic manifestations, including music, videos and films, theatre plays and, in particular, the Esperanto literature. Within the latter, for instance, apart from original literature, written primarily in Esperanto, there are also many texts translated from other languages. Some of these translated novels, short stories and poems are published in anthologies, such as *Itala Antologio* (Azzi 1987), *Svisa Antologio* (Baur 1939), *Antologio de la Moderna Bosnia-Hercegovina Novelo* (Alić 1939), *El japana literaturo* (Miyamoto and Isiguro 1965), which are seen as standing for their respective national literary traditions, making them available to an international public.

The Esperantist notion of culture can be enlarged or narrowed, being alternatively associated with arts or expanded to include habits and dispositions, occasionally even having its existence questioned. Yet the most striking attempt to make Esperantujo

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29 As Richmond (1993) brilliantly states, one of the specificities of the literature originally in Esperanto is that it is, unlike national literary traditions, fundamentally aimed at international readers.
an effective imagined community beyond its pop-up enactments lies in the construction of the philosophical and political programme behind the language. This programme encompasses a set of cosmopolitan principles that, as in diplomacy, aim to create a smooth, non-confrontational communication setting that will enable the management of the relationships between Esperantists from different backgrounds. Such Esperantists will constitute the *alilandanoj* or *eksterlandanoj*, the national others, with whom one may not have much in common – apart, in this case, from the Esperanto language and a potential interest in learning more about other Esperantists’ nationalities. In these relations, what is at stake is ways of dealing with differences and resemblances through cosmopolitan principles. This is expressed through displays of empathy, toleration and respect for other cultures and values (Werbner 2008: 2), as well as through a curiosity for the national other’s experiences.

Thus, the implicit notion of culture mobilised by Esperantists establishes the differences their cosmopolitan principles are going to bring to the fore and to manage. We saw that Esperanto’s communication across boundaries is oriented towards specific boundaries, and that the boundaries to be addressed and crossed here relate to different nationalities, languages, cultures and countries of origin. These border-crossing practices are informed by the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto, which, in turn, constitute the most important feature that Esperantists share and that give them a ground to claim Esperantujo as a fully-fledged community.

However, looking at the enactments of this community, how do these mediations through Esperanto work – and worked over time? How did these different approaches to what I call here cosmopolitanism (and that Esperantists would frequently refer to as *malfermeco*, openness) become so central and come into being throughout the history of Esperanto? In the following section, I briefly outline the ways the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto have developed and have made sense of the use of the language over time, in order to explain the episodic encounters that took place around nationality in the vignette that opened this chapter.
2.3. From humanism to internationalism, with many differences in between

Had Esperanto been a language alone, it may have died out, as was the case with many other planned languages designed in previous centuries. In contrast, the cosmopolitan principles often linked to Esperanto helped to establish it as a broader project. These principles are closely connected with the prevailing values at stake in each historical period, evolving accordingly. Here I will present how the philosophical and political programme behind Esperanto developed, identifying three main ways for Esperantists to approach differences, marked by humanist, non-nationalist, and internationalist outlooks.

The programme behind Esperanto has produced ‘different social modalities of dealing with difference’ (Beck and Sznaider 2010: 399) since the early days of this language. In the late nineteenth century, Zamenhof was highly influenced by the intellectual movement known as Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment (Garvía 2015: 60-61; Lins 2016: 5) and by ideas of bringing peoples together on the grounds of political and religious tolerance, which was also motivated by his own Jewishness. As Zamenhof himself emphasised, the programme he proposed, formalised under the name Homaranismo (1929 [1906]), was inspired by the idea of the de-ethnicisation of social relations (Garvía 2015: 84). In this way, Esperanto and the programme linked to it would encourage individuals to affirm their humanness and to underplay their ethnicity, inspiring Esperantists to perceive humankind as a brotherhood of peoples who share the same humanity. Zamenhof foresaw Esperanto as a tool both to enable international communication and to convey his philosophical and political programme, as he expressed in his opening speech at the First Universal Congress of Esperanto, in 1905:

And now, for the first time, the dream of thousands of years begins to become true. In this small town on the French coast, people have come together from the most diverse countries and nations, and they meet each other not as mute and deaf people, but they understand each other, they talk to each other as brothers, as members of one nation. [...] We all feel like members of one nation, as members of one family, and for the first time in human history, members of the most different peoples stand side by side not as strangers, not as competitors, but as brothers who do not impose their own language onto the others, who understand each other, and who are not
suspicious of each other for the darkness that divides them. As brothers who love each other and who shake each other’s hands not hypocritically, as foreigner with foreigner, but sincerely, as person with person. Let us be aware of the importance of this day, since today, among the hospitable walls of Boulogne-sur-Mer, we meet, not as Frenchmen meeting Britons, or as Russians meeting Poles, but as persons meeting persons (Zamenhof 2001: 6-7, my translation).

This outlook – which we may call ‘humanist cosmopolitanism’ – was in accordance with universalist values of that time, seeing the underplay of national, religious and ethnic belongings as a first step towards a reunion of humankind. In this sense, the claim for a universal language was based on the need for bringing peoples together through the commonalities we all share as human beings. Thus, apart from sharing the same humanity, we would also share a common language, making it possible for us to be one, despite differences – which would not be suppressed, but downplayed. This mediating role that Esperanto was to assume was also presented in postcards printed in the early twentieth century [Figure 9].

![Fig. 9: Postcard praising the rapprochement of peoples through Esperanto, produced in the United Kingdom. It says, in Esperanto: ‘Friendly Salutations. Oh, Let us sing a song/ About the language Esperanto/ In poems and odes/ By writers and poets’. [Source: Raphael Tuck & Sons, 1922. Available at Hector Hodler Library, UEA].](image)

However, it is also interesting to note, based on Zamenhof’s speeches and writings, that this set of cosmopolitan principles aims towards reclaiming the human and
downplaying differences, but do not explicitly entail a Kantian political call for a supranational state, encompassing all the peoples in the world. Kant’s conceptions of cosmopolitan right (Waldron 2000: 229-231) and of a political cosmopolitanism are concerned with a universalist morality and with an understanding of the earth’s surface as belonging to the human race and being for common use (Kant 2010: 21-24). Zamenhof, in turn, was proposing a set of cosmopolitan principles, to be enacted as humanist openness to the Other. Hence, although Esperantists use the expressions civitanoj de la mondo or mondcivitanoj (citizens of the world) when referring to their openness to the Other, this world citizenship is rarely formulated as a claim for an effective citizenship, in terms of international laws and recognition by national states.

Zamenhof’s Homaranismo, as a child of its time, justified the need for this humanist cosmopolitanism to be carried out through Esperanto by presenting language, nationality and ethnicity as being closely connected and interdependent. Homaranismo, for him, would constitute the philosophical and political basis upon which Esperantists would see each other as samideanoj (fellow thinkers, those who share not only a language, but also same ideals). Even though the term samideano is still used among supporters of the neutral Esperanto movement, many Esperantists soon dismissed a necessary connection between Homaranismo and the language. As a consequence of the language’s spread in Western Europe, particularly in France, a shift took place from Esperanto’s initial political claim for openness to a tool to be used to advance science and commerce beyond language barriers, leading to a scenario in which the ideas linked to Esperanto have progressively diversified. Despite Zamenhof’s attempts to strengthen Homaranismo, the initial humanist cosmopolitan approach gave way to many others, as Esperanto has continuously been linked to other sets of principles, which were adopted, refused and adapted by its diversifying and growing speech community.

A remarkable change in this sense came with the strengthening of the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement, which gained ground with the First World War. The war created a scenario in which workers fought against each other, for their countries, for reasons that overall did not concern them. This boosted a left-wing notion of cosmopolitanism fuelled by the argument that the war demonstrated the destructive potential of nationalisms. Led by SAT and strongly influenced by the
thoughts of Eugène Lanti, the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement expressed what we may call a ‘non-nationalist cosmopolitanism’, as a way to foster unity through refusing everything connected to nations and nationalities. As Lanti (2013: 84) argued, one cannot simply deny the existence of nations, just as one cannot deny the existence of diseases. However, their very existence should encourage people to fight against their endurance. However, in his view, internationalism would not provide a solution, since it could not bring equality and peace to the world:

Paraphrasing a saying of Francis Bacon, ‘a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion,’ Jaurès concluded his argument as follows: ‘A little internationalism weakens patriotism; much internationalism strengthens it’. That very clearly means that internationalism in no way aims at the abolition of nationality in the world. Further, all congresses of the various Internationals have declared themselves for the independence of nations, for the autonomy of all countries. Internationalism, therefore, is only a system which aims at the setting up of a juridical organisation among the nations in order to avoid conflicts and wars, but which in no way pretends to abolish the national peculiarities constituted by languages, customs, tradition, and so forth (Lanti 2013: 65-66).

Lanti’s perspective, extensively supported by SAT members and left-wing Esperantists in general, called for a non-nationalist approach, which was more pragmatic than the one advanced by Zamenhof and by the neutral Esperanto movement. Lanti’s ideas can be summarised by his call, which later became SAT’s motto: ‘members of SAT, get used to a beyond-national feeling, way of thinking and attitude!’ From this standpoint, rather than fostering common humanity, proletarian and left-wing Esperantists should fight not only against borders and language barriers, but also more widely against wars, social inequality and capitalism, using Esperanto as a tool to organise their political struggle alongside Esperantists worldwide.

After the end of the Second World War, with the foundation of the UN and the revitalisation of the neutral Esperanto movement, the political programme linked to Esperanto became closer to the internationalism promoted by the UN, in what we may call ‘internationalist cosmopolitanism’. The emergence of ‘non-state political actors’ (Beck and Sznaider 2010: 390) characterised by an internationalist

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30 It is important to consider that, at this time, Esperanto had gained ground among the working classes and left-wing supporters.

31 The English translation of this excerpt was retrieved from SAT’s website.
orientation, such as the UN, UNESCO, and UNICEF, was read as a source of potential support for Esperanto, motivating some of the prominent figures of the neutral movement, such as Ivo Lapenna, to reformulate its programme in internationalist terms. As suggested by Malkki (1994: 56), this emerging UN-like form of internationalism marked a shift from a world beyond nations to a world as a family of nations, from a world community of people to an international community of countries, with nations playing the role of mediators between persons, peoples, and humanity. In this vein, the interplay of language, nationality and ethnicity that characterised the humanist cosmopolitanism was partially taken up again, with close links connecting language, nationality and, this time, culture. People’s nationalities and cultural backgrounds took centre stage in Esperanto settings from this moment onwards. As hinted by Gobbo, once the ‘Esperanto discourse recognized the role of the nation-state, it became normal to say “Dutch Esperantists” or “Italian Esperantists”’ (2017: 43).

As outlined in the previous chapter, this shift towards the UN goals and ideas led Esperantists to an increasing appreciation of multiculturalism and the defence of human rights, in an outlook that is still prevalent today. In this internationalist cosmopolitanism, internationalism and multiculturalism are equated: national and cultural differences between Esperantists are conveyed as differences in language background. The centrality given to internationalism and multiculturalism through the language-nation-culture paradigm is illustrated by the ways in which websites of international Esperanto associations, such as UEA, TEJO and SAT, have been translated from their original Esperanto version into seven, twelve and nineteen languages, respectively. By the same token, UEA prides itself on its internationality, stating that it has members in 120 countries, and the mission statements of both UEA and TEJO describe their appreciation of diversity. In UEA’s case, for instance, in emphasising the role played by international communication in the development of a sense of solidarity and respect for other peoples, this association also endorses social justice by focusing on issues that concern languages, as described in the English language version of its website:

UEA works not only to promote Esperanto, but to stimulate discussion of the world language problem and to call attention to the necessity of equality among languages.
Its statute lists the following four goals: to promote the use of the international language Esperanto; to act for the solution of the language problem in international relations and to facilitate international communication; to encourage all types of spiritual and material relations among people, irrespective of differences of nationality, race, sex, religion, politics, or language; and to nurture among its members a strong sense of solidarity, and to develop in them understanding and respect for other peoples.

Therefore, the crucial shift at play is that national differences, which were underplayed by the humanist outlook and suppressed by the non-nationalist approach, become paramount here for the constitution of an international – therefore, multicultural and multilingual – Esperantujo. The stress on the commonalities we share as human beings – which characterised the humanist cosmopolitanism – is shifted into an emphasis on the features we do not share as carriers of different cultures, presenting these cultures as crucial traits to be made salient and to be celebrated when Esperantists meet. This approach – which is, in a way, Zamenhof turned upside down – led the internationalist cosmopolitanism to prevail. Thus, here, it is the willingness to share and to meet national Others on a more egalitarian footing that drives people to use Esperanto.

In addition, there is more dialogue nowadays between the internationalist cosmopolitanism linked to Esperanto and causes related to social justice, support for minorities and minority languages, language rights, feminism, and environmentalism, as we saw in the first debate I attended in the Universal Congress held in Slovakia. If, in the past, many Esperantists connected Esperanto with other global causes such as socialism, anarchism, pacifism, and communism, nowadays it often draws upon new social movements. These efforts engage Esperanto with contemporary issues, which both attract non-Esperantist feminists and environmentalists to Esperanto and encourage a pragmatic use of the language on social and political grounds, raising awareness of these issues among Esperantists. Again, Esperanto ends up working as a mediator, establishing networks of activism and knowledge exchange, being continuously updated and reinterpreted.

Looking at the humanist, the non-nationalist, and the internationalist cosmopolitanisms that propelled and propel Esperanto, one feature needs special consideration: the changing approaches to nationality. In Zamenhof’s time, the
differences that Esperanto’s set of cosmopolitan principles should underplay were expressed mainly in terms of nationality, mother tongue, and ethnicity. During the time of the Great War, under Esperanto’s non-nationalist approach, social class and political convictions gained ground over nationality. Currently, as an outcome of the UN-like internationalist mindset, the differences to be addressed relate to nationality, mother tongue and culture. However, most importantly, whether being underplayed (such as in the humanist cosmopolitanism), denied (non-nationalist approach), or celebrated (internationalist take, frequently with some degree of xenophilia), nationality often figures as the core of Esperantists’ efforts towards comprehension, solidarity, and respect among people. Presenting itself as a cluster of cosmopolitans in a world perceived as more and more characterised by the upsurge of nationalist and xenophobic values, the Esperanto community often demonstrates a drive to address certain differences and to deal with them in a more inclusive and productive way. Given this focus on communicating across differences, how is this carried out by Esperantists nowadays? Reaching back to the narration of one day at a Universal Congress of Esperanto, these different sets of cosmopolitan principles intersect in the sociabilities engendered by Esperanto.

2.4. Fellow Esperantists, national others

As this historical overview shows, the sets of cosmopolitan principles that have backed Esperanto over time exist as projects – put forward by Zamenhof, Lanti, and by the UN model supported by Lapenna. However, as we identified in the vignette, these principles are performed in many ways in practice, when Esperantists meet. Here the distinction, highlighted by Beck and Sznaider (2010: 386-389), between the normative-philosophical and the empirical-analytical approaches to cosmopolitanism – in other words, between the ‘cosmopolitan condition’ and the ‘cosmopolitan moment’ – becomes entangled as we discuss how certain principles are manifested through sociabilities.
Addressing a particular instance of cosmopolitanism, Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic define ‘cosmopolitan sociability’ as:

[…] forms of competence and communication skills that are based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world. As such cosmopolitan sociability is an ability to find aspects of the shared human experience including aspirations for a better world within or despite what would seem to be divides of culture and belief (2011: 402-403).

Beyond spoken ideas, as cosmopolitan principles are materialised through Esperantist cosmopolitan sociabilities, I dialogue with what scholars alternatively refer to as ‘ordinary cosmopolitanisms’ (Lamont and Aksartova 2002), ‘cosmopolitanism in practice’ (Nowicka and Rovisco 2009), and ‘everyday cosmopolitanism’ (Bayat 2008). Nowicka and Rovisco delineate how ‘cosmopolitanism in practice’ is concerned with:

(1) cosmopolitanism as a practice which is apparent in things that people do and say to positively engage with ‘the otherness of the other’ and the oneness of the world;
(2) cosmopolitanism as a moral ideal that emphasizes both tolerance towards difference and the possibility of a more just world order (2009: 2).

Through a distinct approach, Hannerz’s well-known formulations about ‘cultural cosmopolitanism’ (1990, 2005: 200) posit cosmopolitanism as an upper-middle class openness toward divergent cultural experiences; an ability to make one’s way into other cultures. This instance of cosmopolitanism, showcased by frequent travellers, does not involve any real commitment to other cultures since, as a tourist, one always keeps in mind that at some point one will go back home and leave the realm of the Other’s culture behind. Contrastingly, Lamont and Aksartova (2002: 1) look not at tourists, but at non-college-educated white and black workers in the United States and white and North African workers in France to point out that ordinary cosmopolitanism is not best understood as a short-lived appreciation of varied lifestyles. Instead, it consists of a broader strategy used also by ordinary people to bridge boundaries with Others in everyday relations. Among Esperantists, cosmopolitanism is neither a matter of one-off cosmopolitan sociabilities carried out by tourists in their contacts with ‘exotic cultures’, nor of neighbours and co-workers performing strategies to address racial issues on a daily basis. Encounters in an international Esperanto meeting bring together features of both: the contacts Esperantists establish can either be ephemeral or can come to form long-term
friendship ties; can either be superficial and stereotype-based or can go beyond clichés and lead to meaningful conversations. These characteristics place the cosmopolitan sociabilities enacted by Esperantists as practices that combine elements of both Hannerz’s and Lamont and Aksartova’s approaches to cosmopolitanism.

Aside from these issues regarding the time length and the significance of the contacts between Esperantists, one day at an international Esperanto meeting also depicts clearly how the different approaches to nationality imbued in the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto not only succeed one another over time, but also intersect in the sociabilities that Esperantists carry out when they meet. When Kenneth was explaining the contribution that discussions about Esperanto and language diversity could give to the UN, or when Alina shared with me her experience during her trip to Brazil after coming to know my nationality, the internationalist outlook was at stake. When Juan Carlos stated that his belonging to the world surmounts his ties to his country of origin and his country of residence, he was retrieving the foundational feature of Zamenhof’s humanist cosmopolitanism. Gareth, in turn, presented a controversial perspective: when coordinating SAT’s presentation and debate, he seemed to profess non-nationalism, stressing the position of malsamideanoj. However, in his speed-meeting practice, nationality came before people’s names and other personal information when he consecutively introduced me to his acquaintances.

Another important factor is that the participants of these congresses wear badges displaying the person’s name and country, which occasionally exposes how nationality, country of origin and country of residence are problematically considered to be linked. My own badge offers an example, as it stated ‘Britain’ – where I lived – which contrasted with my Brazilian nationality. A more serious issue refers to the badge of some Catalanian Esperantists who scribbled over the word ‘Spain’ to write ‘Catalonia’ instead, in a situation in which nationalism seems to be imposed on the expected internationalism. As Lamont and Aksartova (2002) point out, there are different ways of being cosmopolitan, which draw on different resources, whether religious or socio-political, against imperialism or for self-improvement. Along these lines, when ways of being cosmopolitan are contrasted, these Esperantists’ perspectives are brought into life in friction (Tsing 2005: 1-18). Thus, when these
global connections (to continue using Tsing’s vocabulary) are enacted in the making, locally, in distinctive ways, the clear-cut distinction that seemed to set apart the humanist, the non-nationalist and the internationalist outlooks are entangled in creative ways.

By enacting these sociabilities built upon contrasting principles, Esperantists establish Esperantujo by communicating in the language and by partially turning national others into fellow Esperantists. As we saw, at international Esperanto meetings, nationality emerges as the core difference to be addressed despite all the other possible differences in play, which may relate to social class, educational background, occupation, age, gender, religion, height, musical taste or eye colour, among many others.\(^{32}\) Esperantists are certainly not the only people who resort to nationality as a way to locate and label people, nor do they form the only community that is built upon national diversity. Yet, taking into account the centrality of Esperantists’ dynamics and practices towards national diversity helps us to grasp a particular way of mediating between people from different backgrounds and to understand the making of Esperantujo – and the consequent making of those who belong to this community, the fellow Esperantists.

As I heard several times during fieldwork, Esperanto works and is worth the effort insofar as the language can be used to connect people, things and places through engagements with national Others. The emphasis on national diversity produces attempts to combine the figure of the fellow Esperantist with the image of a national Other, who is from a different background and who is expected to always have experiences and knowledge to share and to teach to their Others. At this point, it is worth recalling Patrice’s argument, presented in the previous chapter: there is no real Esperantujo when there are only Frenchmen (meaning fellow nationals) in an Esperanto setting. From this perspective, enactments of the real Esperantujo rely on the internationality of the meetings. These, in turn, depend on the presence of national differences, from where fellow Esperantists express their national otherness and bring together what is conveyed as national and what is made international through Esperanto. In juggling fellow Esperantoness and national otherness,

\(^{32}\) Interestingly, some of these differences – mostly in terms of nationality and age – are linguistically marked in Esperantists’ use of the language.
Esperantists present the Us and Them distinction as something positive in a rather essentialist manner.

This distinction is also linguistically marked, and differences in pronunciation, stress and word choice are loosely used as indexes of the Esperantists’ nationalities and mother tongues, as people’s use of Esperanto often reflect these influences. For instance, in a conversation in Esperanto with an elderly English man, a middle-aged French woman and a young Japanese woman, in which we talked about where to go for dinner at the end of one of the days in the congress, there were three distinct ways of expressing the plethora of restaurants available in the surroundings. The French woman initially said ‘oni trovas multajn restoraciojn ĉi tie’ (based on the French form ‘on trouve plusiers restaurants ici). The native speaker of English then remarked that he would have said it differently, as ‘estas multaj restoracioj ĉi tie’ (due to the influence of the English expression ‘there are many restaurants here’). Finally, the Japanese woman contributed to the discussion by saying ‘multaj restoracioj troviĝas ĉi tie’ (‘many restaurants find themselves here’, with the verb in its reflexive form). Even though I could not analyse her sentence concerning the Japanese language, she noted that these distinct ways of saying ‘the same thing’ came from their ways of expressing themselves in their mother tongues.

Just as influences of people’s mother tongues in their varieties of Esperanto are usually praised as an indicator of the internationality of Esperantujo, differences in accents are also commented upon. If we take the word ‘Esperanto’, in Esperanto, as an example: a native speaker of English (particularly of American English, especially when it comes to a person with a strong US American accent) would be likely to place the stress on the penultimate syllable, and to voice the ‘r’ as an alveolar approximant (ɹ). A native speaker of French, by contrast, is more likely to place the stress on the last syllable and to voice the ‘r’ like a uvular fricative (χ). These two forms are distinct from the standard in Esperanto, which would have the stress in the penultimate syllable and the ‘r’ voiced as an alveolar tap (ɾ).

33 In terms of varieties of Esperanto according to the influence of mother tongues, it is also relevant to consider such influence when it comes to studies of children who learn Esperanto from birth (Corsetti, Pinto and Tolomeo 2004; Lindstedt 2006, 2010; Fiedler 2012: 73-76) and in a study of stress patterns in a Norwegian variety of spoken Esperanto (Abrahamsen 2015).
Candea (2010: 132-133) illustrates how Continental French people had a habit of mixing Corsican pronunciation with French speech when they were in Corsica and tried to demonstrate a deeper and long-term connection with the island. In Esperantujo, when trying to display familiarity and ease with the language, Esperantists seek to distance themselves from the influence of their mother tongues and speak in a more ‘standard’ way. As they do this, other Esperantists in the same conversation derive pleasure from searching the influence of the mother tongue(s) in their interlocutors’ speech, as a way to infer their nationality from the way they speak Esperanto: while the one speaking tries to hide it, the listener pays particular attention to it. These recurrent practices both cement and highlight the links bringing together national, cultural and linguistic differences.

Furthermore, distinctions in phrasal construction and accents are frequently complemented by interjections that Esperantists, often unreflectively, utter in their mother tongues when speaking in Esperanto. The best illustration of these are exclamations such as ‘ben oui’, ‘bon’ and ‘enfin’ among native speakers of French, and ‘oh’ and ‘ok’, among English native speakers. Even though Esperanto has its interjections, these are often dismissed when Esperantists express spontaneous reactions during a conversation in Esperanto.

Although, as presented earlier, there are recognised standards in Esperanto, there is also considerable room for manoeuvre, in which non-standard varieties of Esperanto are embraced as a constitutive feature of the national diversity of this community. The relationship between Esperanto and national languages is thought of in terms similar to those that Jaffe (1993) uses to characterise the binary logic that links Corsican and French:

If French was an imposed, official, closed, codified, and authoritative system taught in schools, then Corsican must be anchored exclusively in the domain of the voluntary and nonnormative, noncodified, and transmitted exclusively in the home and on the streets (1993: 103).

Likewise, if national languages have clear standards and rigid rules on what is linguistically right and wrong, Esperanto is conveyed through an appreciation of different varieties, accents and registers of the language and more tolerance with ‘mistakes’. This is carried out in practice by means of a larger flexibility on how
correctness and error are defined – as long as mutual intelligibility is not compromised. However, difficulties arise when non-fluent speakers – like eternal beginner Anthony – try to engage in meaningful conversations without having a developed command of the language. When they do not know a specific word or how to express a certain idea, they try to improvise on the basis of their language knowledge. As I noticed on several occasions during my fieldwork, both in France and in international Esperanto meetings, the verb ‘skani’ (standard Esperanto form of to scan) was often referred to by non-fluent French speakers of Esperanto as ‘numerigi’ (from the French verb numériser, ‘to scan’). The same applies to non-fluent English speakers of Esperanto, who frequently use ‘platformo’ to refer to ‘platform’, while the standard Esperanto form is kaio (coming from the French quai). In this sense, speakers of European languages have an advantage in being understood when improvising, since Esperanto vocabulary is widely based on European roots.

When intelligibility is at risk or they want to erase doubts about the adequacy of the words they use during a conversation, Esperantists would resort to pocket dictionaries or to online dictionaries on their mobile phones. However, seldom were the occasions on which I saw them codeswitching or seeking refuge in words in national languages in international Esperanto meetings, as this could compromise the Esperanto-mediated setting established through the use of the language. In these international meetings, the use of languages other than Esperanto in conversations among Esperantists from different national and language backgrounds is likely to be seen as an index of weak Esperanto language skills.

International gatherings of Esperantists, whether face-to-face or online, provide the occasions in which these cosmopolitan sociabilities are facilitated and carried out. International Esperanto meetings set a frame wherein its participants are tuned in to a specific, Esperantist frequency and in which communication across (certain) boundaries gains centrality. In metalinguistic terms, as we saw, speaking about Esperanto frequently works as an ice breaker to establish an initial contact among people who do not know each other yet. In metacommunicative terms, building upon Bateson (1972: 177-193), communicating in Esperanto is what sets the frame of international Esperanto meetings, in which specific sets of actions and principles are expected to take place. Bateson states that certain messages (such as ‘this is play’,
‘let’s be serious now’, or ‘time to work’) define a frame, and give to the receiver of the message instructions or hints that will help them to understand the messages conveyed within the frame. Here, the very act of using this specific language to communicate sets the frame, steering the concerned participants to be tuned in to an Esperantist wave length. In this frequency, some kinds of difference – namely those related to nationality – are made salient and legitimised, being positively conveyed in terms of diversity, as something to be celebrated. When this celebration and openness are enacted through cosmopolitan sociabilities and when this togetherness, composed of the congress’ participants, is materialised, a sense of belonging to Esperantujo is made manifest. This tuning into an Esperantist frequency creates the image of a community where virtually everyone can feel welcomed and can value (certain) differences, on an equal playing field set by Esperanto in its mediating role. Being no one’s language means Esperanto can be everyone’s, adding one more element to this feeling of having this language – and this community – as one’s own. In short, the fine-tuning and the togetherness produced by these meetings, made possible by enactments of cosmopolitan sociabilities, produce a sense of belonging to Esperantujo. Following this rationale, the success of each Esperanto meeting – and the efficacy of the Esperanto community itself – can be measured by how international they are and how tuning in to this specific frequency enables national diversity to be communicated and celebrated in these situations.

The way Esperantist cosmopolitan sociabilities approach nationality often draw near to practices of xenophilia. This was expressed at the Universal Congress, when, over lunch, Alina became particularly interested in me due to my nationality, as she passionately talked about her experiences in Brazil, or when Agata showed enthusiasm when talking to me about the Rio Olympic Games because of where I come from. Practices of xenophilia took place in an even more intense way in the

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34 This is the main raison why the use of languages other than Esperanto would compromise the construction of this frame.

35 Interesting parallels can be traced between this idea of Esperanto appealing to potentially everyone and Rapport’s way of arguing for ‘anyone’ (2007, 2010) as a transcendental, cosmopolitan human actor. Both Esperanto’s ‘everyone’ and Rapport’s ‘anyone’ claim certain universality of the individual as the figure to be addressed by these claims for human commonalities. Rapport’s Kantian approach, however, tends towards perceiving individual actors as ‘in possession of transcendent qualities whose humanity [is] grounded in a universal form of embodiment’ (2010: 85–86), whereas Esperanto’s cosmopolitan individual actor, despite also sharing human commonalities, is closely attached to their qualities as national actors.
previously mentioned month-long *Tour de France* I was invited to make in 2017. The invitation to travel and to give talks at local Esperanto associations across France came in an e-mail whose title in Esperanto was ‘Speaker from Brazil’. On many occasions during the trip, my hosts listed the nationalities of the foreign Esperantists they had welcomed prior to me, and some Esperantists highlighted that they were especially happy with my visit because I was ‘young, nice, and Brazilian’. In my short stay in a city in the French department of Dordogne, my Esperantist host invited me to visit the school where he worked. He wanted to show the 10-year-old children there that Esperanto was what enabled him, as a Frenchman, to communicate with me. They would, according to him, ‘be very happy to see a Brazilian for the first time’. As was evident, there would be no point in covering the travel expenses for a French national to go on this trip, since Esperanto would not stand out as a communication tool between two French nationals. Being a Brazilian Esperantist was what qualified me to be invited for this trip around France, based on the view that a national other would have more to offer and to discuss with French Esperantists about their different background, knowledge and life experiences in another country.

In these circumstances, the Esperantist notion of world citizenship is resumed and enacted through hospitality: the foreign visitor is the materialisation of the citizen of the world, the one who comes from a distant place and relies on the local Esperanto community’s hospitality in order to make them feel at home abroad. By the same token, the local Esperantists who act as hosts in such situations are also, to some extent, turned into citizens of the world through these encounters. Accordingly, Esperanto is responsible for acting as the mediator that presents the stranger as familiar and that converts strangers into friends (Selwyn 2000: 202), in a way that combines people’s nationalities with their Esperantoness, without obliterating either of them. Being a citizen of the world means that one potentially belongs to everywhere but, at the same time, implies that the given person belongs to somewhere else – in other words, that the person at stake is a ‘foreigner’, meaning a national elsewhere, of a different country. Once this dynamic cosmopolitan sociability takes place, both host and guest enact world citizenship.
From what these examples show, nationality here is not so much a matter of legal citizenship or of rights to hold a certain passport, but mostly of country of origin and of life experiences, knowledge and background to be shared, exchanged, and taught. Invoking someone’s nationality acts as a way to frame the conversation in a diplomatic way, of raising a topic that would be potentially significant and interesting for all of those involved. Due to the very nature of such a focus, these topics are likely to reflect stereotypes and basic understandings of someone’s national background. It was the case when Alina was requested to talk about her country and to dress like a Romanian during her stay among Esperantists in Brazil, or when I, as the ‘speaker from Brazil’, was expected to talk about my country and to answer frequent questions about Carnival, samba, and football among Esperantists in France, or, still, when I was invited to participate in a Carnival parade in a town in the department of Finistère.

When commenting on spatial and human relations around the sociological form of the ‘stranger’, Simmel states:

For a stranger to the country, the city, the race, and so on, what is stressed is again nothing individual, but alien origin, a quality which he has, or could have, in common with many other strangers. For this reason, strangers are not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type (1971: 148).

Along these lines, national others are often regarded among Esperantists as ‘strangers of a certain type’; as national selves, representatives and samples of typological/national varieties (Malkki 1994: 51). Malkki (1994) shows similar views to nationality when arguing how the Olympic Games and the Miss Universe pageant function as ceremonial arenas wherein individuals would stand for their countries as national representatives. By the same token, Harvey (1996) describes how internationalism is displayed via nationalism in her ethnography on the 1992 Universal Exhibition in Spain. At these world fairs, every participating country presents itself with its flag, the name of its capital city, a map, its anthem, and with enactments of its ‘national culture’ through artistic performances, national dresses and national dances, among others. In the same vein, the Universal Exhibitions treat ‘nations’, ‘states’ and ‘countries’ as synonyms (1996: 51-55).
In Esperantujo, as someone who should stand for the national variety assigned to me, I was expected not only to be ‘a Brazilian’ but, quite often, to play the role of ‘The Brazilian’. In this way, the understandings of nationality at stake imply that being Brazilian or French or Romanian at an international Esperanto meeting is perceived in line with people’s expectations about these nationalities. From this, being a citizen of the world implies being able to engage with someone else’s experiences by juggling what they have in common and what they do not; their common Esperantoness and their (preferable) national otherness.

In a world constituted by international migration flows, one could argue that no one needs to learn Esperanto to engage in meaningful exchanges with national others. It could equally be argued that these displays of cosmopolitanism – especially in its internationalist form – are common to nearly every encounter involving people of different origins. Yet, this language was the mediator chosen by some to communicate differences, and the specificity of Esperanto settings lies precisely in how this celebration of national diversity is carried out through the use of this common language. The significance of these opportunities for the Esperantists I was introduced to during the Universal Congress is illustrated by the ground-breaking finding narrated by Gareth, when he learned that homosexuals are not a threat and that many countries are not monarchies. A similar view was also expressed by Maurice, a retired Esperantist railway worker who hosted me in my visit to a city in the French department of Loire-Atlantique, when I asked him if Esperanto had changed anything in his life:

Yes, of course, a lot! And it changed for the better! You know, I dropped out of school when I was 14 years old. Since I didn’t learn much at school, Esperanto gave me the opportunity to learn a lot. I met a lot of foreigners, I made friends with them, I visited other countries, I took part in congresses... thanks to Esperanto! [...]I have three children, and two of them had access to higher education. I’m pretty sure that I have met more foreigners than them. I did it through Esperanto, they did it through their higher education and their high-level jobs. But I met more foreigners than them.

In Maurice’s narrative, meeting national others through Esperanto not only helped him to acquire knowledge he could not access otherwise, but also ‘filled a gap’ in his educational background. Furthermore, it is important to note that Esperanto enabled him to meet a particular kind of national other: one that wants to meet him.
In sum, a diversity of backgrounds and experiences is brought together by the welcoming and international setting created and mediated by the use of Esperanto. Nevertheless, if nationality is the key difference that is made relevant, conveyed as diversity, and productively celebrated in Esperantujo, are there other kinds of differences that are not subject to same fate and that are not equally well received? What if the Other, rather than being a national other, is an Other of a different kind – for example, a ‘weirdo’? If building a community also entails establishing social boundaries to distinguish its members from non-members and to highlight their commonalities (Barth 1969), Esperantujo too has its outsiders and contested insiders.

2.5. L'étranger et l'étrange

The sets of cosmopolitan principles linked to Esperanto feed into a self-perception of this community as more inclusive than the wider society, with Esperantists measuring their xenophilic practices against the xenophobia they attribute to right-wing nationalists and conservatives. In this fashion, their celebration of national diversity is sometimes broadened to encompass support for minorities in general. This has made Esperanto particularly appealing to some national minorities, vegetarians and vegans, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities (especially when the disability has to do with communication issues, such as deaf people) and people holding marginalised political perspectives, among others. However, as Jansen (2009b) argues in relation to 1990s post-Yugoslav evocations of cosmopolitanism, every openness also entails closures, and it could not be otherwise with Esperantists. Beyond the celebration of national diversity, are there differences that are not equally allowed into this community?

Let us go back to the 2016 Universal Congress in Nitra. In the day after the one previously narrated, the UEA board of directors held a forum to present their plans and goals for the forthcoming years, focusing on four major issues: awareness, training, community, and coordination, as ways of strengthening Esperantujo and of
boosting the promotion of the language beyond its community. During the forum, someone in the audience asked:

But what are you planning to do, concretely, to train Esperantists as activists to promote Esperanto? Because there are a lot of stranguloj [weirdos] in the Esperanto movement, and if these people start promoting Esperanto more than they do already, it’s going to be terrible for the image of the movement.

Mark Fettes, UEA’s president, answered:

We are aware that there are some weirdos supporting Esperanto. Of course it’s much better to have someone who knows about the history of the Esperanto movement, who is convincing, and who can explain what Esperanto is than to have someone who wears a green t-shirt and stays the whole day in a busy square in Paris distributing some poor quality leaflets. Maybe someone like this could even discourage people from learning the language. But there are weirdos everywhere, not only in the Esperanto movement. Maybe there are more people like this among us than in other places because Esperanto is about tolerance, it is about including people, and these people probably feel welcomed among us. Maybe we are even too tolerant. But, based on the things that have been taking place in the world lately, it’s better to be extremely tolerant than not being tolerant at all, isn’t it?

Behaviours seen as awkward create the emic category of strangulo [weirdo], towards which Esperantists’ openness is turned into tolerance and can no longer be taken for granted. If the Other can be seen as the carrier of difference-as-inferiority, difference-as-superiority, and difference-as-equality (Harrison 2003: 346), differences that are conveyed as ‘strangeness’ – and depicted as eccentricity or peculiarity – are not equally welcomed in Esperantujo. While those who do not speak Esperanto and are not engaged with this community could be seen as outsiders, the weirdos constitute the undesirable insiders, who stand for a kind of difference that does not relate to national diversity and is not embraced by the core members of the community. In these cases, the closures that result from encounters with strangeness make the borders of this community more evident. As Alberto, a 62-year-old volunteer at UEA’s office, asserted:

Many people who don’t feel properly included in the everyday, wider society, regard the Esperanto world as a more welcoming place and try to be part of it as a way of being accepted, recognised. For this reason, there are some weird and, frequently, excluded people among Esperantists. We can’t describe the ‘Esperanto community’ as if it constituted a simple and homogeneous block of people; each person gets involved with Esperanto for their own reasons, in their own way, and there are also outsiders in this community.
The concern with weirdos among Esperantists is manifested in a twofold manner. As active members of the community, weirdos are classified as boring, creepy, inconvenient, strange, eccentric, thus leading to undesired interactions during Esperanto meetings. At the same time, as potential promoters of the language and active supporters of the Esperanto movement, their ability to attract people to the language is dubious, and they are held responsible for bringing embarrassment and for conveying a bad image of Esperanto. This is what was at stake in the example Fettes gave, of the notorious Parisian Esperantist who often wore a large straw hat and a green t-shirt with the Esperanto star on it and distributed outdated leaflets while advertising Esperanto as ‘the universal language’ in a square in central Paris.

Apart from these undesired insiders being on the margins of Esperantujo – as they are not well regarded or warmly welcomed by most Esperantists – they are also marginal in the sense that some of them are among the most enthusiastic promoters of Esperanto. Being insistent when trying to convince people about the importance of Esperanto is also a feature that leads Esperantists to be labelled as weirdos. As many of them passionately and frequently promote Esperanto, other Esperantists fear that non-Esperantists may have a distorted image of the language because of them. In Garvia’s words, this is what leads Esperantists to be identified by its critics as ‘well-intentioned but ultimately eccentric cranks’ (2015: 164).

One such occasion took place in an evening after a day of activities of the 2016 Internationalist Meeting, in Catalonia. At a bar, Ferran, a 40-year-old Catalanian Esperantist, invited four local women to join our group of Esperantists. He then explained to them that most of us – four men and two women of different nationalities – could speak neither Catalan nor Spanish, but we could understand each other thanks to Esperanto, the language we had in common. He told the women that, out of respect for us, he would only speak in Esperanto during the conversation, and that they should try to understand it. He also tried to teach them a few words in Esperanto, to which they turned up their noses and tried to back away from that conversation in a polite way. In the meantime, other Esperantists in the group tried, unsuccessfully, to stop him. After the women left, Seán said: ‘Ferran behaved like a weirdo, that whole scene was ridiculous! He shouldn’t have done that. Now those women will think that Esperanto is something laughable’.
Similarly, during a conversation about ways of promoting Esperanto I had in Paris with Jean-Marc, an elderly Esperantist living in the French department of Hérault, he said, in French:

Many people don’t know that the line between promotion [of Esperanto] and insistence is a very thin one. In my case, nearly all my friends know that I speak Esperanto, but I’ve already realised that the little I talked about it to some of them was enough. They understood it, they now know what it is about, but they don’t want me to insist on it. If they want to learn it someday, they know that they can come to me and that I can help them. But some people have no idea about this limit, and they end up insisting too much.

Nonetheless, apart from weirdos, are there also others whose inclusion in Esperantujo may be questioned? Some may be precariously included in the community due to not being able to join it fully, as it is the case of Anthony, the ‘eternal beginner’ who attended SAT’s presentation at the Universal Congress. As Gareth said, Anthony has been studying the language and attending Esperanto meetings for years, but his limited command of the language prevents other Esperantists from understanding him, causing Anthony to be partially excluded from more meaningful conversations.

Similarly, those who hold perspectives that may seem incompatible with Esperanto’s set of cosmopolitan principles and who question the value attributed to national diversity may be unable to become fully-fledged members of Esperantujo. This was clearly stated by Piotr, a 36-year-old Esperantist living in the Netherlands, when he was talking about the idea of neutrality supported by UEA:

UEA does support language rights and human rights. I don’t think it’s possible to be completely neutral, but I think that in some aspects these engagements may prevent the promotion of Esperanto. For instance, if UEA says it’s in favour of human rights, it means, among other things, that it may support the rights of homosexuals, for instance. In doing so, UEA – and Esperanto as a whole – may lose adherents from Arab countries, or among people who don’t accept homosexuality.

If the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto encourage openness towards diversity, then unwillingness to welcome homosexuals and to support human rights, for instance, may be seen as opposed to these precepts. As Werbner (2008: 6) argues, cosmopolitanism is not value-neutral – which, in this case, means supporting notions of cosmopolitanism that are mobilised in ways currently dominant in Western
countries. While it is widely accepted that embracing the openness associated with Esperanto must not constitute a benchmark for belonging to Esperantujo, going radically against it can effectively constitute a barrier in this sense. Along these lines, many Esperantists see Brexiers in the present-day United Kingdom as conservative and prejudiced right-wing nationalists, and Brexiers’ political views clash in many ways with the programme linked to Esperanto. Likewise, as suggested by Gobbo (2017: 43), Esperantujo’s cosmopolitan principles have not proven compatible with any form of racism, racial supremacy, and xenophobia, as shown by the controversies between Esperantists from the neutral Esperanto movement and German national-socialist Esperantists in Germany under Hitler (Lins 2016: 85-156), as well as by the rejection of nationalisms that are considered ‘excessive’ and chauvinistic.

The latter stance was made clear by Seán, who attended the abovementioned 2016 Internationalist Meeting. At this congress, the president of the Catalan Esperanto Association enthusiastically called for a moment when Catalonia would become independent and his association would be recognised by UEA as a national association.\footnote{36 This recognition depends on national states, and the current representative of this region within UEA is the Spanish Esperanto Association.} After this talk, which was bilingual Catalan-Esperanto, Seán, a young Irish national, seemed outraged, complaining to two Catalan Esperantists:

Are you Catalanian Esperantists really that nationalist? What’s going on here? I came to a congress called ‘Internationalist Meeting’, but instead of speaking Esperanto and being internationalists, I only see nationalists and people speaking Catalan all the time! This is more like a Catalan Congress, not an Internationalist one! I’ve never seen so much nationalism among Esperantists before! If you guys want to be nationalist and defend your independence, you can do it among yourselves, not at an Esperanto meeting called Internationalist Meeting!

To the extent that this nationalism is seen as chauvinistic and opposed to internationalism, it is understood as out of place when enacted among Esperantists.

Weirdos, Esperantists with limited command of the language and ‘nationalist internationalists’ bring us back to the debate on openness and closures. As discussed above, Esperantists embrace certain kinds of difference, but their closures towards other differences provide tools for the community’s boundary-making. In their
critiques of multiculturalism, Bhabha (1990: 207-209) and Malkki (1994: 56-62) argue that the multiculturalist ways of thinking contain and domesticate differences that cannot be conveyed in a certain way. Expanding this to analyse Esperantists’ internationalist cosmopolitanism, differences among Esperantists are likely to be accommodated within an internationalist-like discourse. Insofar as the creation of cultural diversity takes place alongside a containment of cultural difference (Bhabha 1990: 208), the exotic may be welcomed, but the same does not apply to the eccentric.

Thus, we arrive at two core constitutive figures in Esperantujo: l’étranger and l’étrange, la eksterlandano and la strangulo, the national other and the weirdo. While the étranger can be neatly categorised within the grammar of diversity that is to be celebrated, the étrange cannot. National others are well regarded to the extent that they give meaning to Esperantujo, which happens in a twofold manner. Firstly, national otherness entails differences enacted as diversity, which are, therefore, welcomed, providing others with opportunities to learn something new, from someone who has different background, experiences, and knowledge. Secondly, using Esperanto with someone who has a different mother tongue and language background shows the usefulness and legitimacy of Esperanto as it produces practical reasons for people to study the language.

National others make Esperantujo meaningful, whereas the weirdo, by contrast, as a character commonly acknowledged by Esperantists and often present in this community, is someone who is usually looking for acceptance in a way that is considered weird, creepy, or inconvenient. In being perceived as ‘anomalies’ (Douglas 1966: 30-41), they are at the margins of the Esperanto community, pushing it further and posing a challenge to Esperantujo’s openness to difference. When promoting Esperanto to non-Esperantists, they are seen as particularly dangerous; as people who have some destructive power over this language since they

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37 Drawing upon Douglas’ terminology, anomalies are elements that do not fit in a given set or series, whereas matter out of place refers to elements wrongly placed in a systematic classification. This distinction is useful to emphasise that weirdos are not out place, since there is no right place for them, neither in the wider society nor in Esperantujo. They are, therefore, anomalies as they challenge the system by not fitting anywhere.

38 It is worth noting that these margins are dynamic. For example, if homosexuals could once have been seen as weirdos by Esperantists, they are now largely welcomed in Esperantujo.
may misrepresent it and cause embarrassment to Esperantujo. The weirdos are, thus, the undesired insiders to be gently purged from the community and hidden from the wider society. Nonetheless, their existence is important to the extent that it makes clear that there is a system of classification being formulated here, establishing a community that ostracises certain anomalous members and that enforces its closures when faced with kinds of difference that cannot be encompassed and dealt with.

Alongside openness to diversity – which illustrates the core practices that constitute Esperantujo – tolerance (or intolerance) to peculiarity demonstrates the kinds of differences that will be celebrated and those that will not. In this way, the encounters that take place in Esperanto meetings – especially the international ones – set the frame wherein the principles that orient Esperantujo can be constantly reaffirmed. However, how constant is this constant reaffirmation of Esperantujo? If the enactments of ‘real Esperantujo’ are limited in time and space by the occasions during which Esperantists meet, what remains when these international meetings come to an end and Esperantists go back home? Then, the issue of ephemerality becomes pressing: can Esperantujo and these sets of cosmopolitan principles survive beyond these occasional enactments? What is left when the Other is gone and there is no longer national diversity to be celebrated?

2.6. The ephemerality of the sociability

The cosmopolitan principles widely shared by Esperantists ground attempts to confer some stability to Esperantujo beyond its episodic enactments. Yet how can Esperantujo be effectively stabilised if its enactments through sociability are short-lived, restricted to intermittent contacts online, to occasional letter exchanges, and to international Esperanto meetings that never last for more than one week?

Ephemerality, I argue, is a precondition for these cosmopolitan sociabilities to exist insofar as, for the fine-tuning and the togetherness of Esperantujo to take place, this depends on the suspension of one’s everyday life in the wider society. Drawing parallels between these issues and Turner’s concept of ‘communitas’ (1977),
international Esperanto meetings create moments ‘in and out of time’ (Turner 1977: 96) that are less structured and less hierarchical than one’s everyday life, and are seen as opposed to the latter in many aspects. On the one hand, the wider society is perceived as xenophobic and exclusionary, with people’s everyday lives loaded with compulsory activities and commitments (including the need to speak a certain language). The setting established by the international Esperanto meeting, on the other hand, enables many of these features to be temporarily suspended and replaced with their opposites: Esperanto is not a language people are normally required to speak – which, to some extent, breaks the linguistic wing of everyday requirements – and, above all, these meetings provide settings that are seen as more inclusive and xenophilic, with peoples’ national diversity being celebrated, rather than suppressed or repressed.

In this way, as suggested in the discussion with Rapport (2007, 2010), the establishment of these meetings as opposed to the wider society is not anchored on abstract, Kantian, all-encompassing enactments of cosmopolitanism. Instead, they are grounded on cosmopolitan sociabilities, which attempt to transform, for a given period of time – that is to say, for the duration of these enactments – a xenophobic, unequal wider society into a xenophilic, more egalitarian community. Within this community, differences conveyed in terms of national diversity are emphasised and celebrated, being based on the enactments of people's nationalities which are, in turn, grounded in stereotypes. At the same time that these stereotypes are expected from national others, they are also questioned and overcome. Through these sociabilities, for instance, participants of the 2016 Universal Congress learned, by reading ‘Spain’s scribbled on the badge of Catalan Esperantists, that not every person born and bred in Spanish territory would see themselves as Spanish, nor would have Spanish as their first language or partake of a ‘Spanish culture’. In this fashion, such sociabilities turn basic understandings of Other’s nationalities into ‘real’, ‘actual’ enactments of these nationalities. As a result, the previously constructed Herderian-like interdependence between language, nationality and culture is partially called into question, such that fellow Esperantists who are national others understand that the nationalities of the Others may not correspond neatly with the stereotypes they previously took for granted. Thus, by engaging with fellow Esperantists through a
quest for essentialised cultures, Esperantists end up questioning this very idea of boundedness, which was initially constructed to be later partially deconstructed.

Continuing to build upon Turner’s ideas, for newcomers to Esperantujo who are taking part in one of these meetings for the first time, a change may occur when they join this communitas-like setting. After crossing the threshold, by leaving the congress and no longer being tuned in to the Esperantist frequency, and by returning to their everyday lives, they may become more aware of social exclusions, of language diversity and, as Kenneth said in his talk about the United Nations during the Universal Congress, of ‘the language problem’. According to Kenneth, acknowledging the problems of communication and the difficulties of multilingualism through the diversity that Esperantists encounter in these settings is one of the frequent – and expected – outcomes of these international meetings.

Thus, what – if anything – remains beyond these occasional and regular meetings? Considering Esperanto as the major mediator that sets the frame in which these cosmopolitan sociabilities will take place and seeing these international congresses as privileged moments of liminality, we can consider that something may change once the meeting is over and everyday life is resumed. These meetings may provide opportunities for people – mainly for newcomers, freshly baked Esperantists – to change their perspectives about some issues. See, for instance, Gareth’s case: when he first crossed a threshold through the use of Esperanto for communicating with people beyond the Iron Curtain, he learned things about politics and gender diversity that he had never given a thought to before. This was made possible through a letter exchange with people who seemed to be, according to him, more friendly and open-minded than his neighbours in his hometown.

The long-lasting significance of these opportunities for some people was also expressed in Marie-Christine’s (a retired, 67-year-old Esperantist from a small town in Finistère) amazement when she described, in French, her first contact with Esperantists of different nationalities:

After starting to study Esperanto, I soon decided to meet people who speak it, to try it in practice. Then, in 2015, I went to the Universal Congress in Lille. Wow! What an experience! It was a shock to me! There were lots of people speaking Esperanto there and there were people from all over the world. I felt myself to be a real citizen
of the world. I could talk to all these people; we could understand each other… It was amazing! That experience encouraged me to keep improving my skills in the language, and since then I’ve been attending many congresses. I’ve already been to Grésillon\textsuperscript{39} two times, to summer courses, to Plouézec\textsuperscript{40} as well, and this year I’m going to Poland in May with other Esperantists from my region, and in July I’ll go to Seoul, to the Universal Congress [in 2017]. I’ve never been to Asia. I’ve already registered to attend the congress. I’m still not sure about how I’ll be able to go in terms of money, but I’ll be there! […] I really like the idea of Esperanto; the friendship, the peace, the possibility of mutual understanding… I feel that learning Esperanto and taking part in this local group is like the contribution I can give to a better world.

Marie-Christine also said that, after returning from these meetings, she tries to keep in touch with some of those she met there through Skype and by adding them as friends on Facebook. Meeting national others may not be something equally relevant for upper middle-class cosmopolitans or for those who have easier access to travelling abroad but, for Marie-Christine, as for Maurice (the railway worker mentioned above), Esperanto is perceived as the only tool they have to make this lifestyle available to them, through facilitating encounters with national others who are equally willing to meet them.

The cosmopolitan sociabilities that characterise these encounters may not necessarily last and, as a consequence, Esperantujo is not rendered materially stable in terms of frequent contacts among its members. However, the ways in which Esperantists deal with national diversity during these congresses tend to raise their awareness about language diversity, xenophobia, discrimination, and misunderstandings caused by the lack of a common code of communication, as well as to provide them with more complex, less reified views of national others. Even though the contacts between individual Esperantists may be ephemeral, this awareness and openness derived from the sociabilities enacted on these occasions tend to be more long-lasting, not only anchoring the Esperanto’s cosmopolitan principles, but also operating changes in Esperantists’ views on difference and in promoting perspectives for a more inclusive society beyond Esperantujo.

\textsuperscript{39}The Grésillon Castle is a cultural centre located in the French department of Maine-et-Loire that regularly hosts Esperanto meetings, festivals and summer courses.

\textsuperscript{40}Plouézec is a city by the sea in the department of Côtes-d'Armor where Esperanto summer courses are occasionally offered.
CHAPTER 3. ON MOVING AND STANDING STILL: THE MOVEMENT FROM THE STANDPOINT OF AN ESPERANTO ASSOCIATION

On the site of these always new [Republican] values, for these everyday fights that we call liberty, equality, fraternity, more volunteers are always needed

(François Mitterrand, presidential inauguration speech, 21 May 1988)

The international Esperanto meetings and congresses are the highlight of Esperantists’ participation in Esperantujo and the most important occasions in which the community is materialised and rendered effective. However, what happens among Esperantists and what is done through Esperanto in the meantime, over the rest of the year, beyond these events? Also, what about those Esperantists who, for the reasons we explored in Chapter 1, do not attend these congresses? How do they engage with Esperanto?

The Esperanto-mediated encounters with national Others – and the networks that result from them – lie at the heart of the ephemeral enactments of ‘real Esperantujo’. However, in everyday, less international engagements with Esperanto, there may not be many national differences available to be communicated, causing diversity to lose its centrality. On a daily basis, the use of this language is possible through participation in Esperanto associations. Here, the occasional and international character of Esperanto congresses is replaced with the everyday and local use of the language, in a setting where the national Other is only a virtuality and cosmopolitanism is a potentiality to be accomplished. From this, I ask: what is the point of speaking an international language in a local context, among fellow nationals who share the same mother tongue, and how do local enactments of this international community take place?

Local and national Esperanto clubs and associations are, historically, core places where people encounter Esperanto for the first time. From the association’s standpoint, engagements with Esperanto often take shape as participation in this community and/or as activism for Esperanto. In the latter case, some tensions may
arise over how to promote the language and how to become involved with Esperanto through a more politically engaged perspective. In addition, these associations provide us with a privileged space from where we can look at the everyday lives of Esperantists. Since they are not full-time Esperantists and are also enmeshed in networks involving family, educational institutions, workplace, friends, and other associations, Esperanto becomes only one among many of their interests and social activities.

My analysis in this chapter will revolve around the Esperanto movement, which can both advance Esperanto and/or use this language as a tool to promote other social and political causes. Looking at the associative milieu, we will also approach core issues behind social movements in general: the different strategies mobilised to advance a given cause, the administrative aspects of institutionalised groups and movements, and disputes among organisations that want to promote a cause in different ways. We will examine Esperantists’ expectations about the success of their activism and their hope for its future, as well as their counterparts: the fear of failure and despair when their envisaged outcome seems to be frustratingly out of reach. To explore these issues ethnographically, this chapter will draw upon the dynamics of SAT-Amikaro, one of the Esperanto associations headquartered in Paris, where hope and despair, as well as enthusiasm and apathy regarding Esperanto, were first made relevant to me as critical concerns. When spatiality is kept aside – that is, when people are not travelling, circulating and meeting national Others through Esperanto – temporality gains centrality, which will lead us to a debate with the literature on regimes of temporal reasonings, futures, hope, yearning and indeterminacy, to be read from the perspective of those who stand still in the Parisian associative milieu.

3.1. Where have all our members gone?

It was a Friday afternoon in late February 2016 when I went to Paris for the first time, in order to meet people from the associations in which I was planning to conduct my research. Among the Esperanto associations headquartered in Paris, I
was especially interested in two of them: SAT and SAT-Amikaro. The former, the World Non-National Association, founded in 1921, is a working class-oriented association that uses Esperanto as its working language. Its main purpose is to create a forum to enable discussions of social and political issues from diverse viewpoints seen as progressive. SAT presents itself as kleriga (educational, instructive), not party-political, committed to encouraging the exchange of political ideas in a broadening, non-dogmatic way, rather than being action-oriented (Forster 1982: 192-193; Garvía 2015: 123-124). Created in 1945, SAT-Amikaro (Amikaro meaning ‘Fellowship’ or ‘Friendship’), in turn, is an association linked to SAT, working both in French and in Esperanto, to spread the word about the language and about SAT’s international forum among francophone workers and progressive activists from ‘milieux d’avant garde’ (SAT-Amikaro 2001: 1). Whereas SAT aims to coordinate the international left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement, SAT-Amikaro focuses on francophone countries (mostly France, but also having members in Switzerland, Belgium, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Before travelling to Paris, I had previously contacted members of SAT and SAT-Amikaro by e-mail, since the main goal of my exploratory trip was to meet them and to negotiate my presence there as an anthropologist. Jakov, the president of SAT’s executive committee, replied, saying he would meet me at 5.30pm, in a café next to SAT-Amikaro’s headquarters. He also circulated my message to the association’s mailing list, and I received three other replies from people who would be in the association’s office that afternoon.

I arrived at SAT-Amikaro just before 3pm. Its office was located in the 13th district, in the vicinity of Paris’ so-called Chinese neighbourhood. The association was on one of the neighbourhood’s main streets, in front of the overground metro line 6, with the station Nationale situated nearby. A large panel in the building’s façade read ‘Espéranto Langue Internationale’, easily visible to the pedestrians, drivers and metro passengers going by, and a large window display made nearly the whole interior visible from outside. Externally, it looked like a bookshop, since the shelves with books for sale were located close to the window display. Behind the shelves, a small office had been installed, with a desk, a computer, a few leaflets and advertisement banners, as well as objects to be sold (mostly books, CDs, DVDs, and
Esperanto-themed brooches and t-shirts). To the left of the desk there was a long table, around which all the meetings, debates, talks and classes took place. Behind this, at the back of this shop-like premises, in a corner that could not be seen from the outside, there was a small kitchen – where the members prepared coffee, tea and snacks for the meetings – three shelves that formed a small library, and the toilet. Just past this, there was a room delimited by solid walls where the storage was located and where the volunteers dealt with the accounting at the end of their working days.

When I came in, two men were chatting in French near the desk. I greeted them, introduced myself in Esperanto, and they immediately replied in the same language. They were two of the people who had answered my e-mail a couple of days earlier. JoPo (an Esperanto nickname for Jean-Paul) was about 60 years old, wearing simple clothes and a cap,\footnote{Ironically enough, as we will see later, his cap read the Esperanto word ‘Antaŭen’, which means ‘to move forward’.} and spoke Esperanto with a remarkable French accent, noticeable by the way he pronounced rhotic consonants (with ‘r-like’ sounds) and tended to stress the last syllable of the Esperanto words, rather than the second last. He also made a few mistakes while speaking and, as I would find out later, he seemed to feel more comfortable speaking French rather than Esperanto. Dominique, on the other hand, clearly mastered the language and was very welcoming and enthusiastic about my visit. He seemed to be a very simple person, about 70 years old, bald, skinny, with a few teeth missing and wearing worn-out clothes. His appearance and his clothes suggested that he might be from a working-class background, which would confirm the working-class stereotype associated with SAT-Amikaro. Since I was not yet used to switching between French and Esperanto, I warned them, as soon as I arrived, that I might make a few mistakes, but JoPo soon calmed me down: ‘we also do this’.

I told them about my e-mail exchange with Jakov and my intention to study the everyday functioning of SAT-Amikaro within the scope of my doctoral research. JoPo laughed discreetly, for reasons I would understand later, and we spent some time chatting about Esperanto and the association. I asked them about the dynamics
in the office, and Dominique emphasised that not much had been happening there lately:

Our association has been losing members. *La SAGo* [*SAT-Amikara Gazeto*], our bimonthly magazine, is no longer published for financial reasons and due to the lack of people willing to work for it. In its last issue [Dominique showed it to me], there was a survey about what to do to face this problem of the lack of money and of a decreasing membership. The survey was based on a multiple choice question with three options, to be chosen by the members: to interrupt the activities that aren’t working (like congresses, the magazine, and so on); to keep everything as it is (which would require everyone’s effort, of course!); and to close SAT-Amikaro (in this case, all its money and possessions would be transferred to SAT). I don’t know… We used to have more members, but nowadays people are no longer interested in being members of Esperanto associations...

Dominique mentioned that SAT holds international congresses annually – that year, it would take place in Germany. Soon after, I asked them if SAT-Amikaro also organised congresses. JoPo chuckled and said: ‘this question shouldn’t be asked!’ JoPo explained that SAT-Amikaro had not been holding congresses recently due to the lack of members willing to work to organise them. Then, I realised why JoPo had laughed before: I was interested in following the everyday functioning of the association but, from his perspective, there was not much functioning going on there of late.

Some minutes later, a third person arrived: Yassine. Aged about 25 years, Yassine, of Algerian origin, was born and raised in Paris. He straightened his glasses and greeted me in French, right before the two other Esperantists introduced me to him in Esperanto, telling him I was a student. He asked me, in Esperanto, what I was studying, to which I answered ‘socia antropologio’. He did not understand my Esperanto and looked at Dominique, asking for clarification in French. When Dominique uttered ‘Il étudie l’anthropologie sociale’ before swuitching the conversation back to Esperanto, Yassine seemed to have understood, but he did not know what it meant. Despite his intermediate level of Esperanto, Yassine was there to teach a basic language course to the only student he had in his class, but she had not shown up that day. I asked them how the Esperanto courses at SAT-Amikaro worked, and Dominique said that the classes were free of charge, but the students must be members of the association. The annual membership fee that year was €14. The price was reduced compared to previous years, as the members no longer
received the magazine La SAGo. Later, Dominique offered to prepare some coffee and tea for us. We spent some time chatting, when they showed curiosity about my background and about my decisions to study in the United Kingdom and to do research in France. I asked them some more questions about themselves and about their interests regarding Esperanto. After a few minutes, Yassine (who had a copy of the office’s keys) said he would have to go, and we all left together, so that he could lock up after us. Before we left, JoPo invited me to go for a walking tour in the neighbourhood.

During our walk, he showed me the not very touristic surroundings while we talked about ourselves and about the association. I asked him if there were relations between SAT-Amikaro and other progressive or left-wing organisations in France. He was silent for a while, thinking, and then replied:

It’s difficult to tell, because SAT-Amikaro is linked to SAT, but is not part of it directly. Some years ago, a previous president of SAT-Amikaro was a member of the Parti communiste français, and maybe they [the Esperanto association and this party] worked together more closely. However, things have been changing, and I would say that many new members in the association – say, from 2000 onwards – are not necessarily leftists, so… I don’t know.

At that moment, we were walking past the office of Association des Amies et Amis de la Commune de Paris 1871. He pointed to it and said: ‘There used to be links between SAT-Amikaro and them, but I don’t think someone at SAT-Amikaro still looks after some collaboration with them…’

JoPo said he would have to go home and we said goodbye to each other. He showed me the way back to the association, where I would meet Jakov a few minutes later. Even though Dominique and JoPo had been very welcoming and friendly, they did not seem to be very enthusiastic about what I was planning to do at SAT-Amikaro – not because they did not want me to do my research there, but because they seemed to consider it a waste of my time. According to them, there had not been much happening at the association, as it has been losing members for a long time and many of their previous, fundamental activities (such as the magazine they used to edit regularly and their annual congresses) had been discontinued. In their view, I was about to study a dynamics of something that, in contrast with JoPo’s ‘Antaŭen’ cap,
was not exactly *dynamic*; to approach the Esperanto movement from a place where it had not been moving enough.

### 3.2. The rise and fall of *la vie associative*

Historically, Esperanto associations were essential for the dynamics of the Esperanto community and movement, responsible for enabling this language to take off and this community to come into being. At a time when the early Esperantists were isolated and sought fellow speakers, associations edited and sold books, advertised Esperanto meetings, offered language courses, and provided local meeting spaces. In playing a mediating role, Esperanto associations provided their members with the contact details of many fellow Esperantists, both locals and from abroad, and this early communication in the language enabled the initial establishment of the Esperanto community.

Associations were also decisive for the Esperanto movement and, to a certain degree, they remain the core of it. If the international Esperanto meetings are, as described earlier, ‘the capital city of the Esperanto community’, associations play the historical role of flagships of the Esperanto movement, bringing together and coordinating those who want to work for Esperanto and for other causes through Esperanto. Just as this language is a mediator that connects persons and peoples, associations are the anchors that provide more stability and cohesion for this movement. As anchors, they bring steadiness and control to the movement but, at the same time, occasionally reduce movement and circulation, insofar as they frame a setting and establish guidelines and strategies that may limit the reach of some moves.

At first, most Esperanto associations had a local reach but, over time, they diversified both in terms of functions and scale: the smaller, local ones focus on the practice of the language and on local enactments of Esperantujo, whereas the larger ones with a wider reach are often institutionalised, registered as formal associations under national laws, and develop more activities. These also include holding congresses, running language courses and regular debates in Esperanto, producing leaflets and
other advertising materials, publishing magazines and books, running bookshops and making libraries available to their members. The functioning of these organisations also entails holding administrative meetings and coordinating the various instances of the Esperanto movement, often in a geographically bounded framework, in which there are local, departmental/regional, national, and international Esperanto associations. In this way, these associations link the local and the international, with some steps in between, and function as hubs whereby more connections are established. In this structure, therefore, UEA, headquartered in Rotterdam, is at the top of the scale of hierarchy in the neutral Esperanto movement, whereas SAT, in Paris, is the head of the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement. Within this framework, as previously explained, SAT-Amikaro – where I met Dominique, JoPo, Yassine and Jakov – is the association that collaborates with SAT in French-speaking countries.

Esperanto associations in France are chiefly maintained by the annual membership fees paid by their members. These fees entitle members to receive the magazine most associations edit, to attend their language courses, debates and activities, and to receive discounts when they buy products from the bookshop or register to attend congresses. At SAT-Amikaro, the activities are all run by bénévoles (unpaid volunteers), including the administrative tasks, which means its dynamics depended entirely on the time and energy invested by its most active members. However, reaching back to Dominique’s and JoPo’s comments, after 2014, the monthly La SAGo was reduced to bimonthly publication, and then subsequently discontinued. The SAT-Amikaro congresses, once annual, became irregular in recent years. Some of their language classes, such as the one Yassine was about to teach that day, were cancelled due to the lack of students and of volunteers available to teach. Most importantly, the executive committee, once composed of ten members, was reduced to two – which required the same person to hold more than one administrative position so that the association could conform to the French Law of Associations (France 1901). Thus, as SAT-Amikaro no longer organises regular congresses nor edits its magazine, the activities the association offers are mostly limited to what happens at its headquarters, which makes it nearly invisible to the members who do not live in Paris.
It is because of this scenario that Dominique and JoPo, like many other members of SAT-Amikaro, were worried about the future of their association. After all, what could they do when the association where they diligently volunteer seems to be doomed? How to fight for a cause if the organisation they support is facing such setbacks? What could the consequences of this decline be for the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement in French-speaking countries, and what can be done to reverse this lack of engagement and interest? What does it mean, in practice, to have a decreasing membership? Is it the end – and if so, the end of what?

If associations are historically important for Esperantists, the same holds true for the French in general. In France, associations are linked to the fight for civil and social rights. Legal rights, as well as ideas about citizenship and civic engagement, are paramount in French history, starting from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens, signed in 1789, and followed by other regulations that reinforced or opposed it. The liberal character of this Declaration and its emphasis on fundamental individual rights was used as a justification for the promulgation, two years later, of the Law Le Chapelier. This law banned guilds (the early trade unions) and the right to strike. Based on the idea that class interests could not be placed between individual and general interests, workers’ associationism was prohibited and other kinds of group formation were also regarded as potentially undesirable (Assemblée Nationale 1791).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the rights to associate were gradually restored. In 1864, the French government acknowledged the right to strike and also permitted, in 1868, the right to organise and to join public meetings – provided that these meetings had previously been announced to the concerned authorities. However, the climax of these freedoms and rights was reached only in 1901, when the Law of Associations was promulgated. In it, an association was officially recognised by the French state as ‘the convention by which two or more people share, in a permanent way, their knowledge or their activity with a different aim than to share benefits’. What is crucial here, as stated by the second article of this law, is that ‘associations of people

42 Since 1848, political rights in France (such as the right to vote and to run for political office) are reserved for French citizens (holders of French nationality), whereas fundamental freedoms and civil rights (freedom of speech, of religion, of assembly, and of association, among others) and social rights (including the rights to work, to strike, and to education) are extended to foreign citizens living legally on French soil (Le Bart 2016: 9-13).
will be able to be formed freely without preliminary authorization nor declaration’ (France 1901).

As a consequence, associations came to be perceived in France not only as settings where people could organise socially to share common interests and ideas, but also as bastions of freedom and of social life in general; as institutions that enable the French to engage with civil society more broadly and to associate and express themselves freely. Their socio-historical importance, therefore, comes from this background in which the associative milieu stands for ideas of citizenship, active participation in civil society, civil liberties, and political and social engagements of many sorts. Thus, from 1901 onwards, several associations were created across France, aimed at diverse purposes and goals, providing space and services related to education and professional training, employment and economic life, solidarity and humanitarian aid, citizenship and memory, political, civic and religious activities, culture and art, and sports.

Associations in France that are legally registered and recognised under the status of public interest must have a bureau (committee) with at least three positions: president, treasurer and secretary. Such associations are eligible to receive financial support from governmental agencies and can use the facilities of the Maison des Associations. In Paris, every district of the city has its own premises where the associations that do not have their own headquarters can run their activities and meetings. Registered associations also have the right to hold a stall in the annual Forum des Associations, a fair in which they present their activities to local residents as a way of attracting new members.

Hence, associations are perceived to have a strong presence in the French social life. In this sense, when Raymond, an elderly Esperantist from the French department of Loire-Atlantique, heard that I had started conducting my research among associations, he said: ‘Ben oui, mais la France c’est le pays des associations!’ If France is, in his words, the ‘country of associations’, my ethnographic study could not have had a different starting point. Furthermore, the importance of associations is sometimes referred to through mockery. In a conversation entirely carried out in

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43 For a comparative perspective of such roles played by associations in other countries (United States, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Philippines), see Bresler et alii 2016.
French with Sébastien and Nicole, two middle-aged Esperantists from Paris, Nicole told me: ‘Associations are quite a big thing in France. If you ask some people – ask Sébastien, for instance! – he’ll probably be a member of more associations than his fingers can count! Am I right, Sébastien?’ He replied:

Yes, I think so! Let me see… I support a lot of Esperanto associations, at city, departmental, national and international levels, a lot of naturist associations, many associations for gays and lesbians… Yes, indeed, I think I’m a member of more than ten! But of course I’m not a real member in some of them, because there are some in which I only contribute by paying the membership fee, but don’t really take part in it in practice. I have become a member of three more associations since the beginning of this year – and the year began just a couple of weeks ago!

Continuing the conversation, Nicole said:

Associations [in France] are important for your life outside your workplace. Or, let me correct myself, there are also associations to organise excursions and trips among our workmates! So, even within the workplace, associations are important. Speaking of which, I’m also a member of the association for trips among my workmates! [Laughing] I’d say that if you come across three people in France, at least one of them is the president of an association! [Laughing]

Even though the statistics suggested by Nicole are exaggerated, there seems to be a strong popular engagement with associations across French territory. According to Thierry, Mallet and Bazin (2016: 4), in 2016, 25% of people over the age of 15 living on French soil were engaged in associations as bénévoles.

Like for Sébastien and Nicole, this social ‘omnipresence’ of associations in the country is often the subject of funny comments on stereotypes about the French. As Georges Clemenceau had said, ‘if you want to bury a problem, you must appoint a commission’. Although he was referring to commission within the governmental setting, this sentence is occasionally reframed as a joke or critique about the French stereotypical attitude towards problem-solving in which, rather than addressing the problem, the French simply create a commission – or an association – that ends up not providing any solution. As Leon, an elderly Esperantist from the French department of Morbihan, highlighted in French:

The French create associations for everything! If, for instance, the mayor wants to organise some roadworks and the local population isn’t happy about it, they hold a meeting to discuss the problem, and it would be completely surprising if, by the end
of this meeting, nobody had suggested: ‘Shall we create an association to debate it?’ The French people create associations for everything! [direct transcription].

In sum, la vie associative is often presented as the major setting in which the ‘French lifestyle’ and civic and political participation take place in the country. The French often see associations as ordinary institutions such that their existence is taken for granted – that is to say, their inexistence would be surprising – and their significance comes precisely from the fact that they are an ordinary part of everyday social life. Therefore, coming back to Dominique and JoPo’s perceptions of the shrinking of SAT-Amikaro, what does it mean if their association is facing a difficult situation? If associations are so important both for Esperanto’s and for France’s history, maybe this falling membership and increasing inactivity is not only a matter of losing supporters, but a much broader issue.

3.3. On unsettled traditional settings

SAT-Amikaro is not the only institution facing a decrease in membership, as such a decline in la vie associative also affects other associations in France. Why are these long-standing institutions seemingly languishing and what has been causing this?

In analysing civic engagement and community life in the United States over the twentieth century, Putnam (2000) uses statistical surveys to show how North Americans have been losing interest in participating in civic associations, political parties, unions, churches, synagogues, and local clubs and community organisations of all sorts. From charity institutions to school bands and regular poker games among friends, most of these traditional enactments of the ‘American community’ are collapsing due to people’s diminishing interest in them.

Regretting this situation and trying to identify the reasons for these changes, Putnam attributes this backlash in associationism in the US to both wider changes in society over the century and a generational change. Long-standing members of bowling clubs, churches, and the like, are usually as active as they have always been, but the major difference is that these groups and associations are barely renovating their
membership. In this way, the ‘long civic generation’ of those born before the end of the Second World War is passing from the scene and is not being replaced by the baby boomers and following generations. Even in cases when associations recruit new members, these do not display the same interest in attending meetings and in becoming involved more directly in these organisations. Putnam also notes that membership in the fastest expanding organisations nowadays, such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, often takes the form of financial support (through donations of money and payment of membership fees) rather than of regular participation in the organisations’ activities, in a scenario in which members are progressively replaced by consumers (2000: 157-158). Meanwhile ‘old-fashioned’ institutions such as the Rotary Club, which produces civic engagement via its regular meetings, are losing vitality. This resulted, according to Putnam, in the weakening of associationism in the United States, with the current North American community being less involved and committed than previous generations, and with its younger members showing less interest in voting, donating blood, sharing, participating and collaborating.

Without drawing upon Putnam’s liberal grammar of patriotism and nostalgic regret, we can trace some parallels between the situation in the United States and in France. In France, too, la vie associative, also based on the idea of engagement citoyen (civic engagement; see Bartolone 2015) seems to be losing its centrality and going through radical transformations. These are marked by generational changes and changes due to people’s life cycles. As Sébastien and Nicole pointed out, most memberships in associations end up being more a financial contribution to a cause than a practical commitment, in which one can pay one’s membership fee and express one’s support for an association or a cause through a ‘checkbook affiliation’ (Putnam 2000: 158) without necessarily being an active member. This kind of membership – quite common in France, as many people are members of several associations at the same time and would not have the time or willingness to engage with all of them – plays a role in maintaining an association, but does not contribute much to its everyday dynamism.

Once seen as the starting point of people’s social lives in France, nowadays associations compete more with decentralised and less institutionalised social networks, the internet being the ultimate example of this socio-historical change.
Associations gather people together on the basis of shared interests but, above all, of a shared space. In this vein, the members of Nicole’s association for trips among her workmates share the same physical workplace, where they regularly meet. By the same token, a francophone Esperanto association is likely to be restricted to places where French is customarily spoken. Online social networks, on the other hand, rely more heavily on interests in common, since spatiality and distance are not barriers here (Putnam 2000: 172-174). In this sense, the internet has replaced, more than reinforced, these spaces of socialisation and collective action (as I will discuss in depth in Chapter 4). This was expressed as an important generational change, since the generations born from the late 1980s onwards had access to more communication technologies than the previous ones.

If new generations do not see associations as the necessary hubs from which their social lives should begin, the same applies to people in the early stages of their lives. As shown in a survey by France Bénévolat comparing the years 2010, 2013 and 2016 (Thierry, Malet and Bazin 2016: 4), the rates of engagement in associations by age group show that the lowest percentage of participation is among 15-35 year-olds, while the highest rate is among those older than 65. Younger people often regard associations as excessively bureaucratic and formal and are not as interested in assuming positions as president or treasurer, writing minutes for administrative meetings, keeping the association’s website updated, writing regular magazines and newsletters to be sent to its members, organising regular events planned and announced far in advance, or in managing the accountancy and reporting regularly about their activities, finance and membership to the district council in order to continue to receive its financial and logistical support. In this sense, civic engagement is also a matter of people’s life cycles, since, according to both my ethnographic data and France Bénévolat’s statistics, people in France seem to become more active in institutionalised groups, associations and movements at a later stage in life.

Adding another layer to the specificities of youth engagement, there are public agencies that encourage young people to participate for a certain period of time as interns or paid volunteers in collective-oriented institutions. At European Union level, the European Voluntary Service (EVS) gives financial and logistical support
for Europeans aged between 17 and 30 years old to volunteer in projects abroad, which brings non-French Europeans to French associations and French youths to organisations in other countries. Similarly, at the national level, the *Service Civique* aims to ‘reinforce national cohesion and social mixing by offering an entire generation the opportunity to engage and to give their time to the collectivity and to the others’ (Agence du Service Civique 2016: 3). These funded opportunities changed the profile of youth engagement. While it increased youths’ participation in the associative milieu, it made their volunteering conditional on remuneration, which means that their involvement is often terminated when the financial support ends. Thus, these public agencies produced a wave of young *volontaires* (volunteers with a more formal commitment, often remunerated), but not an increasing number of *bénévoles* (unpaid volunteers).\(^{44}\)

A partial exception to these changes in civic participation in France. as pointed out by Frédéric – a middle-aged Esperantist from the French department of Maine-et-Loire – are sports associations. In his words:

*I think associations are dying, but not necessarily Esperanto. [Me: Do you mean Esperanto associations or associations in general?] No, not only, I mean associations in general. Mainly intellectual associations. Because there are some that may still be quite important. For instance, associations for ice skaters or football associations. If these people want to meet and play together, they must have an official organisation, whereby they’ll hold their meetings, play together, and so on. But associations for Esperantists, for writers, for many other things… people can do these things online nowadays! They don’t need to be in an association, to pay membership fees or to attend regular meetings in associations to do these things. So, apart from sports associations, I think all the others may be losing importance [direct transcription].*

Some of these also struggle to maintain membership, but they are more stable than the others due to the togetherness that the practice of sports requires.\(^{45}\)

A seeming counter-argument to the idea of the shrinkage of *la vie associative* is the significant growth in the number of associations in France. As displayed in the graph

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\(^{44}\) The survey previously mentioned (Thierry, Malet and Bazin 2016: 4) revealed an astonishing boost of 35% in the volunteering of 15-35 year-olds between 2010 and 2016. This figure, however, represents a transformation rather than an intensification in *la vie associative*: the *Service Civique* was initiated in 2010, and many of these new, young volunteers are remunerated either by this programme or by EVS. Since this survey does not distinguish between paid and unpaid volunteering, it is not surprising that the provision of remuneration for volunteers would encourage this increase.

\(^{45}\) Putnam (2000: 109-110) makes a similar point by stressing that sports associations in the United States have witnessed a growing membership, despite a falling rate of participation when compared to the expanding population of the country.
below [Figure 10], 75,115 new associations were created between 2014 and 2015, with Paris being one of the places in the country with a higher density of creation of associations (Bazin et alii 2017: 6-10).

![Fig. 10: Evolution in the number of associations created in France per year [Source: Bazin et alii 2017: 4].](image)

Despite France recently being on the crest of a wave of new associations, this does not imply that these associations can count on an active and substantial membership, as the same report acknowledges (Bazin et alii 2017: 10). Even though a growing number of associations confirms their importance in the French mindset, this does not contradict the fact that the role associations historically played regarding sociabilities and connectedness in France has been changing.

With these transformations in mind, reaching back to the specific situation of SAT-Amikaro, it is worth considering that this association aims to create a space for social and political debates involving mostly laypeople, workers, and left-wing activists for progressive causes. This purpose also weaves this association into the fabric of traditional, class-based political and social movements, and into these movements’ dynamics throughout history.

France is well-known for hosting ground-breaking revolutions and radical social mobilisation, from the Revolution of 1789 and the beheading of their own king to the Paris Commune of 1871, the uprisings of May 1968, and several internationally known strikes, occupations, demonstrations, and protests of all sorts. On the classic clear-cut distinction between the political Right and Left in France, the Parti 150
communiste français (PCF) played a core role in the country’s history, with crucial participation, for instance, during the French resistance to the Nazi invasion. Among left-wing tendencies in France – encompassing communists, socialists, pacifists, unionists, anarchists and others – the communists are, historically, the strongest, especially because communism became more popular than revolutionary syndicalism among French trade unionists after the First World War (Forster 1982: 198). However, they have been losing space in the national political scenario. An economic shift from labour-intensive to capital-intensive industry weakened the ranks of the proletariat, and this party’s refusal to adapt to these changes and to incorporate other social claims (such as those from feminists and environmentalists) thinned its basis of supporters (Raymond 2005).

In the second half of the twentieth century, a growing drive to unite the Left also proved rather unsuccessful, culminating in the communists accusing the Parti socialiste (PS) of subordinating its political convictions to electoralist strategies, which undermined further collaborations between them and with other left-wing groups (Raymond 2005: 67-86). Recently, as Waters (2003) argues, traditional forms of political engagement, such as voting and being a member of political parties, may be in decline and seen as ineffective. However, this is contrasted with a rise of new and less institutionalised forms of mobilisation that challenge growing inequalities and address some of the pressing issues in contemporary France, such as the recurrent chauvinistic measures taken by France and by the European Union towards the wave of new non-European migrants (especially in regards to the sans-papiers, the undocumented migrants), the growing use of nuclear energy in France, and proposed changes to labour legislation.

If SAT-Amikaro is deeply connected with workers’ and left-wing movements, it is understandable that a weakening of the ranks of the proletariat and schisms within the Left – within the French left-wing movements and parties, as well as within the workers’ Esperanto movement – would also affect this association’s dynamics. Since its foundation, SAT-Amikaro has addressed an audience made up of francophone

46 Before the foundation of SAT (in 1921) and of SAT-Amikaro (in 1945), the was already a left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement in France. Esperantists acted mostly through non-Esperanto associations and published articles in the left-leaning magazine L’Humanité, reporting on the 1905
proletarians and left-wing activists, engaging with their struggles and creating conditions for them to join the international left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement. After the Second World War, this international movement led by SAT was growing rapidly and outnumbered the neutral Esperanto movement in some European countries (Forster 1982: 206-213), including in France. However, the causes presented above culminated in the shrinking of SAT-Amikaro, as described by Dominique and JoPo.

Given that the promotion of Esperanto is also carried out through a social movement, based on mobilisation and on the dissemination of a given cause, the Esperanto movement itself (both in its neutral and left-wing forms) is also subjected to its own ups and downs. Drawing upon Forster’s sociological study of the Esperanto movement in Britain (1982), this feeling of a decline in Esperanto is not exclusive to current SAT-Amikaro members. In the early twentieth century, members of the Esperanto Association of Britain (EAB) felt that this language was at its peak and were very enthusiastic about promoting it. However, ‘already in 1936 the question “Is Esperanto still alive? I never heard about it” is suggested as commonplace’ (Forster 1982: 277). In a statistical survey on EAB membership carried out in 1968, Forster shows that the association was deeply conscious of its ageing membership, with 45% of its members being over 60 years old. Consequently, the seeming lack of immediate hope for an improvement in this situation in the 1950s and 1960s led EAB to focus on ‘expressive rather than instrumental activities: it resembled a club for genteel old people’ (1982: 281). However, Forster’s study shows that EAB’s membership had stagnated, rather than declined. Despite its problems in attracting new members, it had retained the allegiance of enthusiastic, long-standing Esperantists, which also accounted for its elderly social composition.

Therefore, the perception of ageing membership and decline of the association, shared by Dominique, JoPo and other members of SAT-Amikaro, is not unique to them and to the current scenario. As we saw, these changes are exclusive neither to Esperantujo nor the French associative milieu. In this particular case, however, they

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Universal Congress of Esperanto and ‘stressing the value of Esperanto for the workers, who do not have the means for luxuries such as learning foreign languages’ (Forster 1982: 189).

47 In the same period, SATEB (SAT en Britio, SAT in Britain), the Anglophone association linked to SAT, became dormant, with few members who did not continue its activities – which is still the situation to date.
also mark a shift from an engagement with Esperanto as a cause, through the lenses of class-based social movements, to an engagement with it merely as a language that mediates between people from different backgrounds, as we will see in Chapter 4.

Thus, amidst these changes, what specifically is being grievèd for? When Dominique enumerated the pieces of evidence showing the decline of SAT-Amikaro, he mentioned the irregularity of their magazine and congresses, their empty classroom, their falling membership and, most importantly, the lack of active members willing to perform everyday duties at the association. Those who volunteer at SAT-Amikaro – such as Dominique, JoPo and Yassine – are the ones who feel and express more directly this loss and despair. They are often overwhelmed by administrative tasks in the office and do not see fruitful results from their efforts, as there are very few new members turning up. They also constantly stress that the current members are not as active as they themselves are – or not active in the way they expect in terms of welcoming visitors to the bookshop, teaching the language, helping with the maintenance of the office and with the accountancy, and playing administrative roles. Hence, what is being lost is a specific space of socialisation – the frame of the association – whose structure Dominique, JoPo, Yassine and other left-leaning Esperantists rely on in order to meet fellow left-leaning Esperantists, to practice the language and to buy Esperanto-related books and materials, as well as to hold weekly debates. These debates, in turn, are an example of the forum in which SAT-Amikaro aims to materialise its goals – and, chiefly, to enact Esperantujo locally.

On Friday evenings, SAT-Amikaro holds its babilrondoj (debate circles). Like the one briefly presented in the Introduction, these debate circles, which I regularly attended during my fieldwork, count on ten to twenty habitual participants. They choose the topics to be discussed and announce them in advance, on posters in the association, as well as on its website and through the mailing list. Every participant brings drinks and nibbles – stereotypically enough, cheese and wine are always the main ones – which are enjoyed as we discuss topics such as the French elections, the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, fascism and authority, and alternatives to nuclear energy. The different kinds of cheese and the fairtrade, organic wine around which these debates are held stand as indexes of what these Esperantists fear to lose hold of: the local and ephemeral, but regular, materiality of Esperantujo made
possible by these face-to-face activities; the ritualised collective behaviour of meeting, being together, and drinking wine while debating progressive political perspectives in Esperanto at the association’s headquarters.

The developments in *la vie associative*, in the means of communication, in the wider social and political scenario in France, and in Esperantujo are interwoven, bringing uncertainty to those who, for years, have been socialising, debating, learning, and participating in Esperantujo through SAT-Amikaro. Losing these regular political debates held around wine and cheese stands for a loss of a certain engagement with Esperanto, through the lens of a cause to be advance alongside other class-based social causes. Without this political forum, Esperanto would still exist, just as communism and anarchism would still count on supporters. However, Dominique and JoPo, among others, would lose the setting in which these issues are connected, in which Esperanto mediates between people who are politically engaged with different causes. This uncertainty demands action and imposes the question: what measures can be taken to fight for the continuation of it? What should be done when there is apparently nothing to be done?

### 3.4. A movement that is not moving well enough

Dominique and JoPo said that not much had been going on at SAT-Amikaro lately. Nonetheless, something had been happening there. The association is not only the setting in which a specific enactment of Esperantujo takes place, but also the place from where the movement – in this case, understood as social movement – begins. SAT-Amikaro assists the promotion of Esperanto to a French-speaking public through networking with left-wing groups and movements and other Esperanto associations alike by holding stalls and producing leaflets, brochures, t-shirts and other advertising materials. Esperantists whose engagement with Esperanto is mostly restricted to the associative milieu often invest their time and efforts to promote the association and the language, as a form of offsetting their despair with some hope for recruiting new speakers and new members. After examining some of the reasons why
SAT-Amikaro has faced problems in renewing its membership, we will now explore what its volunteers and active members do to deal with their despair regarding this association. The Esperanto movement provides some answers for this issue.

One of the systematic ways in which SAT-Amikaro promotes Esperanto and itself is by holding a stall at the annual Fête de L’Humanité, the festival mentioned in the Introduction, in which Pascal and Valentin were the main people responsible for the stall in 2016. Overall, it is a festival aimed at bringing together different political parties, social movements, and groups that are discontent with the current political situation in France and in the world, including communists, socialists, environmentalists, collectives supporting refugees and migrants, groups against Israel and for Palestine, feminists, anti-capitalists… and Esperantists. In 2016, just like many of these groups, Espéranto France and SAT-Amikaro shared a stall to promote Esperanto and their associations at this festival. Volunteers from these two associations brought Esperanto learning materials, literature books, and t-shirts to display in the stall and spent the three days of the festival talking about Esperanto to the passers-by. Their stall was also announced in the Esperanto broadcast at Radio Libertaire the week before. Although all the volunteers at the stall that year were French and Esperantists, it was easy to identify who came from each association: three out of six volunteers from Espéranto France were wearing green t-shirts displaying Esperanto-related contents, whereas three of the five SAT-Amikaro volunteers were wearing anti-capitalist t-shirts. Aside from their distinct outfits, they also had different materials and strategies to promote Esperanto.

Vincent, a young Esperantist who came from the French department of Haute-Marne, volunteered for Espéranto France at the stall. As he distributed leaflets to passers-by, he asked them, in French: ‘Have you ever heard about Esperanto?’ From there, he continued, emphasising how learning it is easy, how Esperantists are open to other peoples and cultures, and how this language creates possibilities for people to meet, travel and communicate. Meanwhile, Frédéric, who came from Maine-et-Loire, was another Espéranto France volunteer, and tried to attract visitors by saying, also in French:

Many people learn English because they want to get a better job. Many people study French because they want to live in France. But when someone learns Esperanto, it’s
not because one expects to make money out of it, but because one is open to other peoples, to other cultures. Thus, Esperantists are usually more open, and you can feel the difference when you travel and meet an Esperantist.

In the meantime, Ivan and Elodie, a couple in their 30s, also from Maine-et-Loire, volunteered for SAT-Amikaro. Due to their support for other movements including animal rights and veganism, they were walking around the festival venue, rather than standing next to the stall. As they mingled with activists who had similar interests in the other causes they supported, they also talked about Esperanto to them.

Espéranto France and SAT-Amikaro had different leaflets. While the first emphasised the use of the language for travelling, meeting national others and supporting the rights of language minorities, the latter stressed that this language is easy to learn for those with no background in foreign language learning and that it offers a forum for discussing political issues in an alternative way. However, what both associations shared was a slight disappointment in the fact that most passers-by seemed to be indifferent to the cause that drives them. Long-standing Esperantists from both associations, as well as those who are interested in history, recall the days when Esperanto seemed to have more visibility in the wider society, such as when the language was used in advertisements by companies such as Air France in the 1930s [Figure 11] and Philips and Fiat in the 1970s (Forster 1982: 249). However, this nostalgia is more pronounced among long-standing members of SAT-Amikaro, such as Alain.

Alain, a retired postman, was a regular participant in the babilrondoj, but did not volunteer at the association’s office. Due to his personal interest in history, he used to explore the archives of SAT-Amikaro. From the documents, pictures and references he found, Alain showed me ‘the days when Esperanto was more closely connected to left-wing causes’. In this sense of political activism, the high point of public attention was probably reached in the 1930s-1940s, when Esperanto was intended to be used to welcome and to inform foreigners participating in the Popular Olympic Games that were due to take place in Barcelona in 1936 [Figure 12].48 Shortly after, this language was also used in a poster by the regional government of

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48 These anti-establishment games were meant to compete with the official Olympic Games taking place in Berlin under the Nazi regime during the same period. Eventually, the Popular Olympics in Barcelona were cancelled as the Spanish Civil War broke out in the same month (July 1936).
Catalonia to call international attention to the Catalonians’ fight against fascism [see Figure 3, in Chapter 1]. In registers about France, in the early 1940s, an internee taught Esperanto to other prisoners at the internment camp of Royallieu-Compiègne, which housed French resistance fighters and Jews during the Second World War [Figure 13].

Fig. 11: Advertisement saying, in Esperanto: ‘Travel by aeroplane / Air France / Transport of passengers, mail, goods’ [Source: Kongresa Libro de la 29a Universala Kongreso de Esperanto, Warsaw, 1937].

Fig. 12: On the façade of an information office in Barcelona, the information for foreign participants was displayed in four languages: Spanish, French, English, and Esperanto [Source: photographer unknown, c.1936. Available at the website SobreHistoria.com].
Aside from the perception that Esperanto has lost visibility among workers and left-wing activists, when members of SAT-Amikaro look inward, they also see symptoms of a loss of vitality in the association and in the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement in general. People like Alain build this perception on the basis of the association’s decreasing membership, on pictures and narratives that depict large attendances both at Esperanto courses in the association’s headquarters and at SAT-Amikaro congresses in previous decades, and when they recall the good old days of 158
several of its members standing for the association and for Esperanto in the demonstrations of the First of May (Labour Day) in Paris. For active members like Dominique and JoPo, as well as for amateur historians like Alain – i.e. Esperantists who engage with Esperanto only through the framework of this association, without attending congresses, going to other associations or using the language online – the decline of SAT-Amikaro is expanded and also stands for the shrinkage of the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement and of the language itself. From their standpoint, Esperanto is losing ground as a mediator between people who are interested in discussing political causes from diverse perspectives, and the only way they can see to reverse this situation is to recruit new people to Esperanto and new Esperantists to SAT-Amikaro and SAT.

The Esperanto movement works to ensure the dynamism and constant enlargement of Esperantujo. However, as Guigni (1999: xx) argues, social movements are not homogeneous entities, and this goal, which seems to be a single one, is pursued in different ways, according to the distinct approaches that characterise the neutral and the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movements. These distinctions are here represented by Espéranto France and SAT-Amikaro, as these associations both collaborate with each other and, occasionally, show signs of competition and rivalry. At the Fête de l’Humanité, for instance, their collaboration was expressed by the way both associations jointly held the Esperanto stall: each paid half of the costs of the stall and both displayed their materials and presented their activities in the same space. However, this joint effort did not prevent Grégory (president of Espéranto France) and Ivan (president of SAT-Amikaro), among others, from engaging in joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Mitchell 1956), in which Grégory labelled members of SAT-Amikaro derogatively as ‘la komunistoj’ (the communists), while Ivan referred to the members of Espéranto France as ‘la burĝoj’ (the petty bourgeois). While the former saw ‘the communists’ as a group that supports a lost cause, the latter regarded ‘the petty bourgeois’ as politically alienated. In this way, through frequent teasing and mockery, they softened the existing tensions and competition by making fun of each other without taking offence. The representatives of the French neutral and of the French left-wing, workers’ Esperanto
movements were standing side by side, but each believed themselves to be above the other, in terms of assuming a qualitatively better engagement with Esperanto.

Each association has clear aims, asserted in their statutes. Whereas Espéranto France is oriented towards advancing the language and bringing French Esperantists together, SAT-Amikaro aims to promote an international political and social forum in Esperanto aimed at francophone workers. Unlike many Paris-based Esperantists who are members and participate in both Esperanto associations (as well as in others), the members of the board of directors of each, as well as the associations’ most active members and volunteers – such as Dominique, Yassine, Ivan and Elodie at SAT-Amikaro, and Vincent and Grégory at Espéranto France – engage more often in joking relationships. In this vein, they alternate between collaboration and competition, between fighting together to ensure the future of the language and fighting against each other in defence of a given engagement with Esperanto. On a similar theme, Alcalde comments on the competition among specific NGOs striving to secure resources and to give visibility to their causes and activities (2010: 155-156, 437-438). Alcalde argues that it is commonplace that at times the support for a specific organisation supersedes the fight for a cause, especially when it comes to the perspectives held by the organisations’ core members. In the associations we are looking at, instead of fighting for Esperanto as their ultimate goal, some of their members fight especially for the betterment of their own groups, and activists for Esperanto become, above all, active members of a given association.

Roche and Sachs (1955, also comprehensively analysed in Forster 1982: 74-75), draw a distinction between the ‘bureaucrat’ and the ‘enthusiast’ when talking about the leadership of social movements. In their view, ‘the bureaucrat tends to regard the organization as an end in itself, [whereas] to the enthusiast it [the organization] will always remain an imperfect vehicle for a greater purpose’ (Roche and Sachs 1955: 250). Building upon this, it is noticeable that many Paris-based Esperantists – who could be classified as enthusiasts, being interested in Esperanto in many of its forms – maintain links with several Esperanto associations. In contrast, unpaid volunteers and board members of Espéranto France and SAT-Amikaro – the bureaucrats, who equate the progress of ‘the cause’ with the success, growth and stability of their specific association – are more likely to limit their activism for Esperanto to one of
these organisations. These bureaucrats (to stick with this terminology) are the ones who most often engage in joking relationships with members of other associations. In some cases, their link to a specific association is also linguistically marked. Dominique – like other members of SAT-Amikaro who only engage with Esperanto through this association and do not mingle with ‘the petty bourgeois’ – distinguishes ‘ci’ and ‘vi’ as, respectively, the informal and the formal second person singular in Esperanto, following from the difference in French between ‘tu’ and ‘vous’. In this way, he highlights his refusal to use a formal language, remaining true to his working-class background and to the class-based orientation of SAT-Amikaro and SAT, making it clear which association he belongs to.49

Aside from these tensions and differences between Espéranto France and SAT-Amikaro, those who engage with Esperanto exclusively through their associations share the previously described perception of the shrinkage of an association as a sign of the decline of Esperanto. By volunteering at the stall at the Fête de L’Humanité, these Esperantists also faced the scepticism displayed by the passers-by, who did not show interest in the language or did not regard Esperanto associations as ‘credible collective actors that could disrupt existing political arrangements’ (Tilly 1999: 263). Such reactions evidence an apparent failure of the movement to recruit new speakers and increase Esperantists’ feelings of apathy and anxiety.

Hunt and Benford (2004: 445) list four moments of people’s engagement with a social movement: becoming aware, active, committed, and weary. Analysing SAT-Amikaro within this framework, if this association fails to raise awareness of the class-based, left-wing approach to Esperanto that its members support, it will fail to secure new members. Without these, the only option left is to encourage a more active engagement of its current members, with the purpose of increasing their commitment to the association. However, when this attempt is also unsuccessful, the only process they experience is a growing weariness among long-standing members.

49 Unintentionally, this performative use of Esperanto also discloses him as a native speaker of French, since this distinction is drawn from the aforementioned difference between ‘tu’ and ‘vous’ in French and is not used by Esperanto speakers from other language backgrounds. Nonetheless, ‘ci’ as an informal second person singular also figures in some early texts in Esperanto, as well as in documents from the Youth Esperantist French Organisation (JEFO, the youth branch of Espéranto France) in the 1970s. Nowadays, however, it is a linguistic mark often associated with SAT-Amikaro and, to a lesser extent, with SAT, while ‘vi’ became the standardised second person singular in Esperanto.
More than a shortage of new members, this is a matter of a lack of active members – which can be either new or old – in sufficient numbers to run the association’s activities properly.

There is also an internal diversity within SAT-Amikaro that occasionally hinders its attempts to set the movement in motion again. In some of the meetings of the executive committee, the possibility of more regular updates on the association’s channel on Youtube and its page on Facebook was raised, as a strategy to make SAT-Amikaro’s activities more visible. Although nobody objected directly to the suggestion, it was not easy to recruit a volunteer to do it, as they were overloaded with tasks and some of the elderly ones had limited computing skills. In addition, for political reasons, some of the anti-capitalist members were not keen on using Facebook. This issue caused a dispute about whether political convictions should or should not be relinquished when the association’s survival is at stake – a dispute which was ended only when JoPo volunteered for this task.

Despite the actual decline in membership having been, to some extent, stabilised in recent years,\(^{50}\) the recognition of shrinkage is based mostly on a perceived lack (and ageing) of volunteers and active members to perform everyday activities at SAT-Amikaro. This apparent stability in membership, however, is not seen positively, as a sign of steadiness and endurance, but conversely, as an index of stagnation, in which the left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement cannot move forward. Despite the volunteers’ efforts to maintain the office, to run courses and debates, and to promote the language, they do not see positive results coming from their investment. They have to sprint to stand still, but they are standing still in a muddy terrain, in which the current generation of active members is not sufficiently engaged and is not being replaced by a new generation. Some social movements, political parties and other associations feel a sense of urgency when they attempt to seize the opportunity given

\(^{50}\) In a conversation, Marcel, the previous treasurer, told me that the association reported having more than 600 members in 2009. However, when he became treasurer, he discovered that this list was outdated, including people who were deceased and others who no longer paid the annual membership fees. When Marcel confirmed the fee-paying members, he came to the figure of 490 in 2010. The update of this list and the information he gave to the members about the actual membership was a shock for many. From 2010 to 2017, the membership decreased further to 192. Even though it may seem to be a substantial decline, the decreasing membership in recent years was not equally surprising or shocking for the members, since it happened gradually over these years. When one year was compared with the previous one, this quantitative decline was barely noticed by the members.
by a specific political occasion or when they feel they are about to reach their goals. In contrast, members of SAT-Amikaro like Dominique, JoPo and Yassine also display a sense of urgency in their discourses and practices – but, in their case, this is based on a fear of failure.

3.5. When time gains centrality

While specific political opportunities can provide occasions for a social movement to be successful, the lack of such moments is one of the factors that make it difficult for the Esperanto movement to gather supporters and to achieve more satisfactory results. Marullo and Meyer (2004) illustrate the importance of such political opportunities by referring to the anti-war movement in the United States:

Our argument is based on a paradox: peace movements are most likely to mobilize extensively when they are least likely to get what they want. When there is a relatively open moment in American policy, when the conduct and content of American foreign policy is under review, as in the period after the end of the Cold War, for example, peace movements are generally invisible. At times when movements are facing the most difficult challenges, that is, when policy appears to be becoming more aggressive, expensive, and dangerous, mobilization is most likely to be extensive (2004: 642).

What they call a paradox, however, does not seem to be such. In effect, when war and armed conflicts become poignant, it is likely that the anti-war movement will become more necessary, as the cause they fight for gains centrality. Far from being paradoxical, this represents the very functioning of social movements, as these moments provoke and create reasons for mobilisation.

In Esperanto’s case, however, political opportunities do not seem to be equally present. Unlike armed conflicts or climate change, which require quick mobilisation to solve a pressing issue conveyed as urgent, causes linked to language diversity and language rights are unlikely to require immediate responses. This entails a shortage of occasions that can be seen as critical for successful mobilisation around Esperanto. It constitutes, therefore, a social movement that struggles to find its momentum and to situate its cause at the top of political agendas. In terms of
membership, the figures in associations, NGOs and political parties usually fluctuate in moments of stronger mobilisation, important protests (as we can see from the example of the women’s movements in the UK and the US given by Gelb and Hart 1999: 163) or during elections – but again, in SAT-Amikaro’s case, the cause they support is not subject to change in the same way. During the Cold War, Esperanto could be advertised as a politically more neutral alternative to Russian and English, the two competing imperialist languages at the time. Yet the end of this conflict undermined this strong argument for Esperanto. Regarding the United Nations and its sympathy towards Esperanto and UEA’s approach to it – as Kenneth highlighted in his intervention at the Universal Congress narrated in the previous chapter – the UN Sustainable Development Goals do not mention anything related to language diversity or language rights. With Brexit, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union was seen by some Esperantists51 as a window of opportunity, in which Esperanto could be conveyed as part of an attempt to raise people’s and governments’ awareness about the relation between national languages and power within the EU (Fians 2018). However, debates about Brexit have focused on borders, immigration laws, and economic issues, and the language issue in the post-Brexit European Union appears to be far from a critical one.

Esperantists like Dominique and JoPo recall narratives about when Esperanto was used by workers and revolutionaries and feared by governments, and compare these with the current scenario, in which neither Esperanto nor language issues, broadly speaking, seem to receive the attention they deserve. Furthermore, the current situation of Esperanto seems to reflect the decline of the non-nationalist cosmopolitanism backed by SAT and SAT-Amikaro, which reached its peak during the first half of the twentieth century. Among the long-standing active members and volunteers of SAT-Amikaro, there is an occasional mourning that ‘Esperanto fiaskis’ [has lost] or ‘krizas’ [is in crisis]. This is rooted in a perception that Esperanto has been left behind, losing the significance it once had within the left-wing milieux. Through the display of these nostalgic perspectives – which refer to a past of Esperanto and of SAT-Amikaro that was both lived and idealised by them –

51 Some members of SAT-Amikaro were against using Brexit to promote Esperanto. For them, the possibility of Esperanto being advanced as a candidate working language for the EU would turn it into an imperialist language. If the learning and use of Esperanto were to become a requirement in some settings, this would undermine Esperanto’s non-compulsory character.
Dominique and JoPo seem to be stuck in the past, in a certain past, as a consequence of their remembrance of those glorious days, never to return.

In an essay on temporality and eternity, Augustine (1998: 221-245) reflects on the nature of time, calling into question the existence of past, present and future. In his digressions, Augustine states that the past may not exist: it existed once, but now that it has begun and ended, it has ceased existing. Likewise, since the future has not yet come into being, it also does not exist, at least not yet. In his words:

Take the two tenses, past and future. How can they ‘be’ when the past is not now present and the future is not yet present? Yet if the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time but eternity. If then, in order to be time at all, the present is so made that it passes into the past, how can we say that this present also ‘is’? The cause of its being is that it will cease to be (1998: 231).

Therefore, the present is an interval with no duration, for if it had duration it could be divided into past and future. After questioning the very existence of temporality, but convinced that something must exist, Augustine argues that past and future do not exist in themselves (not yet or not anymore), but their existence is manifested in the present. In his words, ‘the present considering the past is the memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, the present considering the future is expectation’ (1998: 235). Hence, the present is where temporality is manifested and where past and future can be conceived.

Along these lines, SAT-Amikaro members like Dominique and JoPo recall, in the present, during our conversations, events and debates in Paris, the existence of a glorious past, in which they had an active association with more participating members and more regular activities. In particular, as supporters of an institutionalised forward-looking social movement, what they miss so brutally is the momentum that Esperanto once had. What they mourn is mostly the loss of a feeling of vibrant activism and engagement, through which Esperanto as a cause seemed to stand a real chance of contributing substantially to a better world in providing a forum to internationalise debates on left-wing political activism through an Esperanto-mediated international communication. In this sense, borrowing Piot’s expression, their nostalgia for the past is, in fact, ‘nostalgia for the future’ (Piot 2010).
In his study of the post-Cold War situation in Togo, Piot ethnographically discusses how some Togolese survived and thrived in the country and abroad after the death of their dictator and subsequent transformations in the country’s political system. These changes led to the erasure of the previous governmental order and its replacement with NGOs and Pentecostal churches, which developed into a situation in which the future the Togolese desired was positioned farther from attainment. In this sense, nostalgia for the future (Piot 2010: 20) denotes longing for a future that, in the past, seemed to be closer to fulfilment than it is now. A comparable situation applies to SAT-Amikaro: in their narratives, Dominique and JoPo were looking forward, desiring a future for Esperanto and for their association that seemed to be farther from realisation than it was before, due to Esperanto having lost its momentum.

This understanding of nostalgia, therefore, brings past and future together – but, at the same time, it brackets precisely the moment in which an awareness of such time-passing takes place: the present. Dominique’s and JoPo’s narratives depict the present not as a field of action which they could act upon, but predominantly as a space devoid of action, inhabited by people who by and large seem to have no power over this perceived decline. Along these lines, the present becomes the descriptive ‘is’ stuck between the wistful ‘was’ and the normative ‘ought to be’ (Jansen 2015: 37-39).

Looking at everyday lives in a neighbourhood in Sarajevo following the end of the Bosnian War, Jansen (2015) shows how the locals long for ‘normal lives’. Such normality, however, was almost consensually described in terms of the lives they lived before the 1990s, and evoked an aspiration for a similarly normal future based mainly on recollections of past mundane practices, rather than on spectacular stories. From this, the distinction Jansen draws between ‘hope’ and ‘yearning’ seems to be of interest here. As he argues, hope refers to ‘a future orientation that is positively, affectively charged: a degree, however small or hesitant, of expectant optimism’ (2015: 43), whereas yearning denotes ‘a persistent longing. It is continuous and prolonged, and its object is known to be out of reach: it can be both lost in the past and deferred in the future’ (2015: 54-55).
Along these lines, the hopes that Dominique and JoPo display for Esperanto seem to be suspended between past and future, finding no ground in the present. In this scenario, their hope is replaced with a yearning, a longing to hope for the future of Esperanto. Their yearning is not necessarily a recollection of a spectacular past, of ‘golden days’, but a yearning for a past that had a future, a nostalgia for a fully-fledged momentum. In other words, it refers to a remembrance of a past in which SAT-Amikaro seemed to have a bright future ahead.

When these SAT-Amikaro volunteers advertise Esperanto through events such as the Fête de L’Humanité, they are often exposed to utterances that consider Esperanto to be a language of the past, which was supposed ‘to become’ (in the future) the de facto world language, but that ‘never was’ (Docx 2016). This perspective – according to which the bright future of Esperanto would necessarily be connected to its universal use – takes this language as a project directed towards a distant future, which was never attained. Paraphrasing Douglas (1966: 36-41), this approach presents Esperanto not as a matter out of place, but out of time, as a cause that was defeated and that has no place in the present. In this vein, between a past that has ceased to exist and a potentially problematic future that has not yet come into being, where can we locate the present, this interval in between that has been emptied?

Pointing out that the present is where knowledge practices are located and where the past and the future are represented, Ringel (2012, 2016, 2018) urges us to consider the present in its own right, as the only interval of time that we can approach ethnographically. The author also stresses that studying the present entails not viewing it as a simple consequence of the past: the present is neither determined by the past nor does it predetermine the future. In many ways, we could say that this outlook echoes Augustine’s perspective of the past being represented as memories and the future as expectations in the present: what really matters is how regimes of temporal reasoning are expressed in the present and how time, memories and expectations are mobilised as resources. At SAT-Amikaro, these Esperantists’ present is inhabited by the ways they engage with the passing of time at the association and at their personal engagements with it and with Esperanto. Yet, to a large extent, they regard their present as being partially disempowered in its
potentiality of provoking changes, remaining mostly a locus of memories and expectations.

By addressing hope and perceptions of the present and future among young anarchist activists in a shrinking city in Eastern Germany, Ringel (2012) shows how these anarchists responded to the languishing of a city with no job opportunities and no prospects for the future. Through acts such as being vegan, throwing parties with alternative dress codes, producing poetry and art, as well as debating issues such as gender and sexuality, they may not be changing the future of the city or provoking substantial changes in the local society. However, this does not mean that they have failed as political activists. They were not addressing the distant future in the first place, but targeting more mundane aspects of life in a critical way, directing their actions, therefore, to the present and to the near future. From this, Ringel argues:

But what hope is actually gained from the ethnographic material I have presented? Neither shrinking nor economic decline have stopped. Most young anarchists continue to leave their hometown, some of them pursuing mainstream careers elsewhere. That said, we should not measure their achievement in regard to our own hopes for change or the emergence of new solutions (2012: 183-184).

If we do not impose our conceptions of hope on the volunteers at SAT-Amikaro, we will notice that when they recall Esperanto’s and the association’s past, they are engaging with the momentum they experienced and with the immediate references and narratives they have in mind. What they grieve for is not an abstract collapse of Esperanto due to its seeming failure to become universal, but for the concrete and everyday signs of the momentum Esperanto once seemed to have counted on, which they expressed by evoking how the language is no longer systematically taught among political activists and how the association’s congresses, magazine and activities lost regularity and support.

Examining the evolution of the species, Bergson (1944: 296) argues that reality itself, just like evolution, is a perpetual becoming. Within this framework, unrealities are realities that did not come into being (not yet, at least) and that are, therefore, registered as absences. If perpetual becomings engender realities, immutability would make room for the idea of ‘nothing’, referring to the absence of something that never came into being. In Bergson’s words:
There is absence only for a being capable of remembering and expecting. He remembered an object, and perhaps expected to encounter it again; he finds another, and he expresses the disappointment of his expectation (an expectation sprung from recollection) by saying that he no longer finds anything, that he encounters ‘nothing’ (1944: 306).

Linguists assess the vitality of a language by analysing its number of speakers and the regularity of its use. Nonetheless, for the association-bound members of SAT-Amikaro, the relative absence of a real dynamic at the association in the present contrasts with what they remember and expect (in Bergson’s terminology). From their standpoint, irrespective of what linguistic theories have to say about it, Esperanto has been losing vitality and the Esperanto community – at least the Esperanto community as they know it – is languishing.

As we discussed, what Dominique, JoPo and others are grieving for is their local and ephemeral, but regular, materialisations of Esperantujo, in which they ritually hold their babilrondoj and discuss politically-related themes in Esperanto while drinking fairtrade, organic wine. Despite them knowing that there are new speakers learning and using the language elsewhere – in other countries, online, and even in other Esperanto associations headquartered in Paris – their specific setting, to which they devote their time and energy as volunteers, seems to be heading for a not-so-bright future. Irrespective of how weak or strong the broader Esperanto community may be, their participation in this community is undermined. In the face of this situation, what are they longing for? Those at SAT-Amikaro who employ this rhetoric of loss are not imagining a distant future in which Esperanto will come to be spoken everywhere, by everyone. Instead, they are aspiring to a near-future in which the association will be more active, with more participating members, more language classes and activities, well-attended congresses, stronger links between Esperanto and politics, and a regular magazine. If we do not measure their achievements in regard to our own hopes, as proposed by Ringel (2012: 184), then we will be able to see that their yearnings are directed towards everyday, very concrete accomplishments, with the endurance of their participation in Esperantujo and with the stability of SAT-Amikaro as their mediator in the near future being the achievements they aim for. In this sense, their grievance is very concrete, based on nostalgic recollections of the
momentum they once had, and their yearnings are also tangible, directed towards the continuation of the association.

In some ways, the uncertainties that such yearning carry can also be beneficial. Hopes and futures can be *disappointable* as a principle (Jansen 2016: 454-458), but the indeterminacy they create also allows for some optimism and hopeful possibilities. As of late 2016, several months after my first meeting with Dominique, JoPo and Yassine, La SAGo began to be regularly issued again, despite the small number of volunteers involved with its editing. In April 2017, the association held a congress in Saint-Sébastien-sur-Loire, near Nantes. At this congress, the treasurer—who, by then, was left as the only remaining member of the executive committee—announced he would leave the committee. This would compromise the legal endurance of association, as it would no longer have any legal representative within the French state. His call was successful: six people offered to run for the committee, and all of them were democratically elected by the association members. For the time being, SAT-Amikaro seemed to be in its way to a revival. For the time being, their yearning was transformed into a fully-fledged hope. But how stable can ‘for the time being’ be? To what extent could we say that hope can bring certainties? It cannot. Maybe the association has found its way towards the promise heralded by JoPo’s cap: ‘Antaŭen’, to move forward! But this is just a ‘maybe’.
CHAPTER 4. MOBILE YOUTH: AGE GROUPS, GENERATIONS AND NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

We don’t play bridge, we bridge the age gap
(Gordon Zola, excerpt from the poem
*Power to the People (Pensioners’ Rap)*, 2016)

As active members of an association and supporters of a social movement, Esperantists like Dominique and JoPo engage with Esperanto as a cause to be advanced and feel regret when their activism seems to fail to keep SAT-Amikaro’s activities running properly. However, this does not mean that a spectre of longing is inevitably haunting Esperantujo as a whole. As Brigitte, a middle-aged Esperantist historian from a rural area of Bretagne, once told me, in French:

> Of course members of associations are pessimistic about Esperanto! Those who are in associations are always counting: ‘how many members do we have now? Did we lose any? We had 48, now we have 46… What can we do?’ In the meantime, those who attend Esperanto congresses, who meet other Esperantists, who travel – they’re doing something with the language, they’re enjoying it. They have more reasons to be enthusiastic and optimistic about Esperanto because they see it working in practice!

The perception that Esperanto associations are losing centrality and not properly playing the mediating role historically assigned to them does not mean that Esperanto as a language has failed as a major mediator. In many ways, the language continues to attract people’s attention and to recruit new speakers. However, if new Esperanto speakers are rarely becoming members or attending meetings in associations, where are they? In contrast with Dominique’s and JoPo’s concerns regarding the associative milieu, other people – mostly young people – are learning Esperanto and engaging with it in different ways, joining Esperantujo without worrying about institutional facts and figures. From Dominique’s and JoPo’s uncertainty about Esperanto’s future, we will now look at those who are certain about Esperanto’s present. In this chapter, I will approach the Esperantists in Paris who bypass institutionalised frameworks in their engagements with Esperanto. I will
analyse how Esperantists meet and establish networks through other mediators, through interests and activities that, to a certain extent, challenge the French and Esperantist stereotypical structure of an association-bounded social life. In going beyond the associative milieu, we will encounter actors who remain largely invisible from the perspective of that milieu: youth.

This will lead us to a discussion of institutional and less institutionalised network-formation, diverse perspectives built from distinct positionalities, and of the difference and complementarity of age groups and generations. In Esperantujo’s case, this community is constituted by a long-standing age gap that has lately been reinforced by new communication technologies, such as the internet and the online social networks that it brought into being. Returning to the instability of Esperantujo and its renewal, approaching these informal networks will place us in a setting where discourses on the past, present and future do not play a central role and where, instead, spatiality and circulation return to the fore. In a dialogue with Ariès’ discussion on stages in one’s life cycle (1962), Qvortrup’s interpretation of age groups as structural forms (2009) and Ringel’s approach to ‘presentism’ (2012; 2016; 2018: 8-13), among others, this chapter will consider the perspective of young Esperantists and Esperanto speakers. From that, I will analyse how young and elderly speakers (do not usually) meet and how age becomes a central feature in establishing particular enactments of Esperantujo in Paris that move away from SAT-Amikaro’s approach of political causes and activism.

4.1. The invisible networks

After two months of fieldwork, Yassine, from SAT-Amikaro, was the only Esperantist I had met in Paris who was younger than 30 years old. When I joined the Facebook group JEFO-aktivularo/ Membres actifs d’Espéranto Jeunes, for members of the French Youth Esperanto Organisation (hereafter JEFO), I realised that this 30-member Facebook group was also largely inactive, with only one person, Cédric, writing occasional posts there, alternatively in French and Esperanto. In mid-October
2016, Romain, another member of the group, posted a question, asking when JEFO would hold its next administrative meeting in Paris, which resulted in Cédric and him scheduling it for early November. When I sent a private message in Esperanto to Cédric on Facebook, to introduce myself, he showed enthusiasm for me as a foreigner and welcomed me to join them.

Arriving at the meeting, held at the office of Espéranto France\(^{52}\) on a Saturday afternoon, I met only two young people, Julien and Quentin. They greeted me in French, also saying that Cédric was on his way and that the meeting was about to start. At first, I did not know what would happen, since there were only the three of us in the room. Then, Julien turned on his laptop and said that most of the participants were scattered around France and would join us online. Cédric then arrived at the office, and the discussion started, with five more people joining us via Skype. The first topic to be discussed was the organisation of FESTO, the week-long Esperanto youth meeting organised by JEFO. Established in 1996, this event was supposed to be held every summer, but its periodicity has been irregular and it had not taken place since 2014. After a long discussion, entirely conducted in French, the participants voted and decided that the festival would not happen again the following year due to the lack of active JEFO members willing to organise it. After they reached this decision, Romain – who had convened this meeting and who had wanted to organise FESTO – expressed dissatisfaction with the inactivity of the association and raised an important issue: since JEFO was no longer editing a magazine nor holding regular social meetings and since even its Facebook group was inactive, what was the point of its continued existence?

A debate on the possible closure of JEFO followed, which frustrated me: now that I had finally met young Esperantists, would this group cease to exist? Soon JEFO would have to elect a new administrative committee, but the few prospective candidates for its presidency said they were not willing to head a ‘ghost association’, one that only exists on paper. This decision was, however, postponed for a future administrative meeting.

\(^{52}\)To recapitulate, Espéranto France is the French branch of UEA, representing the neutral Esperanto movement in France. JEFO is the French branch of TEJO and also the youth wing of Espéranto France, having, therefore, the right to use the latter’s office for its meetings. The difference between Espéranto France and JEFO relates to age: one has to be under 30 years old to be a member of JEFO.
When the meeting was over and Julien turned Skype off, the participants in the office invited me to join them for drinks. In the bar, Cédric told me that JEFO had been dormant lately, but that there were young Esperantists in Paris attending weekly Esperanto classes at the prestigious École normale supérieure (ENS). Cédric himself was doing a Masters in Mathematics at the ENS and was a student on this course. Just like the other twelve postgraduate students – mostly from Mathematics and Physics, attending this optional Esperanto module taught by an Esperantist Physics professor – Cédric was first attracted by the logic and rationality behind this constructed language, as he stated, in French:

> Our teacher is very good and many of these students are very motivated to learn Esperanto. So, they’ve been practising a lot and learning quite fast. You know, Esperanto is a logical language, and this kind of thing attracts mathematicians and physicists. Once they start learning it, they get very enthusiastic.

A couple of weeks later, some ENS students came up with the idea of organising an end of year party, to be held at Espéranto France’s office. They invited the participants of the course at the ENS and also spread the invitation through the (by then inactive) Facebook group JEFO-aktivularo, so that people from both the ENS and JEFO could attend. This strategy proved successful: thirteen people attended the party, in which conversations switched frequently between French and Esperanto. Apart from the 45-year-old professor, all the other participants were between 20 and 30 years old, and none of them attended the regular meetings in the Esperanto associations I had been looking at up to then.

During the party, I had an interesting conversation in Esperanto with Maxime, who lives in a banlieue south of Paris:

> I found out about Esperanto when I was installing Open Office on my computer, in around 2006. When I had to choose a language for it, I noticed that there was Esperanto on the list, right after English. My father was next to me when I saw that, and he made a comment about Esperanto. I found that interesting, kept it in mind and, some time later, decided to study it. I learned it online, and then I came here [to Espéranto France’s office], but found people here too old and quite boring. So, I’m still interested in Esperanto, but I use it mainly online, on Telegram and Twitter. I try to use it online as much as I can, because I like it, and since I live near Nicolas [who was also at the party], we’ve been organising a group of young Esperantists from that area, and we meet at Nicolas’ flat quite often to practice the language. […]

Apart from my use of Esperanto on Telegram and Twitter, these gatherings give me the weekly dose of Esperanto that I need.
Maxime found the members of Espéranto France too ‘old’ and ‘boring’, which led him to look for alternative ways of participating in Esperantujo. He found his way in the less formal and irregular gatherings held at his friend Nicolas’ flat. There, young people simply practiced and used Esperanto while eating, drinking, listening to music and having fun. Without a specific topic or structured debate, their informal conversations emerged spontaneously from the interests they had in common.

At the end of the party, Nicolas, who was also present, approached me and, in Esperanto, included me in the networks of young Esperantists in Île-de-France:

We created a closed group on Facebook to arrange our meetings. The frequency of our meetings is quite irregular, but I post on the group whenever I’m planning to do something, and they come. It’s quite nice and informal, you should come along someday! I’ll include you in our group. It’s called Padawans Espérantistes, as a reference to the young apprentices from Star Wars who would one day become Jedi.

Due to the informal, non-institutional character of these networks, it took me some time to become aware of their existence and activities. From the standpoint of the Esperantist associative milieu, where most of my interlocutors by then stood, the fact that JEFO’s Facebook group was dormant indicated a potential absence of young Esperantists in Paris. The first JEFO meeting I attended (and one of the very few it held throughout that year) proved me wrong. The active Esperanto youth’s invisible networks located young Esperantists outside commonplace Esperanto associations and institutional settings, in gatherings taking place potentially anywhere in and around Paris, as well as in online settings. Using the city and its surroundings as a platform for their enactments of Esperantujo, young speakers gathered in meetings that were often organised at short notice and that popped up all across Île-de-France.

Because of their (in)visibility, it was more difficult for me at first to join these youth networks. Yet, once there, I quickly became enmeshed. I was invited to Esperanto classes at the ENS, to dinners and gatherings in the Quartier Latin in Paris, to language practice sessions at the Parisian Café Polyglotte, to Nicolas’ flat, and to closed and secret groups on Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram. What is more, I later realised that Maxime was in fact a well-known and active Esperantist on the internet who often posted in Esperanto through his accounts on many online social networks under a pseudonym. Moreover, what struck me was the fact, confirmed by
Maxime in our conversation, that none of these young people attended regular meetings at associations.

4.2. The old and the new Esperanto communities

The language learning process in Esperanto has historically taken place in face-to-face classes (frequently held in the headquarters of local groups and associations), courses by post, and autodidact learning through language books, with learners later improving their language skills through letter exchange. Recent decades, by contrast, have witnessed the emergence of a community-changing tool: online Esperanto courses and the consequent emergence of the first generation of speakers who have learned this language through the internet. Among the many online Esperanto courses currently existing, one of the first available, in French and oriented towards French speakers, was iKurso, which has been the gateway for many French people who learned Esperanto online from the 1990s onwards. Several other online courses were created, including Duolingo – currently the most popular among Esperantists – which offers Esperanto courses through English, Spanish and Portuguese. Having set up its first Esperanto course in 2015, Duolingo counted over one million active Esperanto learners in December 2018.\(^{53}\) Most of the Esperanto students at the ENS came across this language for the first time and started studying it online before joining the ENS’ face-to-face course. These young people are from the first generation of speakers who learned Esperanto online and are sometimes referred to by other Esperantists as ‘duolinganoj’, the offspring of Duolingo.

There is a parallel between, on the one hand, correspondence courses followed by letter exchange and, on the other hand, these novel language learning processes, in the fact that most online language use favour text over voice (Boellstroff 2008: 152-156). In this sense, those who learn Esperanto through courses such as iKurso or Duolingo are likely to develop more their writing than their speaking skills. However, a defining difference between these learning processes is that the fast pace

\(^{53}\)Duolingo’s definition of active learners refers to those who are registered on the course and excludes those who have completed it.
of online communication – which is often even synchronic, in cases of instant messaging and live chats – allows for faster learning and an almost immediate use of the language. While studying the language and progressing at Duolingo, many learners also ask for clarifications, ask grammatical questions, and start practicing the language in forums on StackExchange, as well as in groups on Telegram or on Facebook (such as the groups ‘Esperanto’ and ‘Duolingo Esperanto Learners’ on Facebook, which counted respectively 21,512 and 11,330 members as of December 2018). Groups like these also allow beginners to practice the language in an environment where conversations tend to be more superficial. In these, mistakes and typos are widely accepted, and posts and messages in Esperanto along the lines of ‘Hi, I’m an Esperanto beginner. I’m here to practice the language’ are the norm.

Another important feature of online Esperanto courses is that they contribute to consolidating the influence of English over Esperanto. Since the first Esperanto course on Duolingo was offered in English and became a major gateway for new young Esperantists, expressions arising from English, such as ‘Kio la fek?’, gained popularity among young speakers. An Anglicism that is a word-for-word translation of the English expression ‘What the fuck?’, expressions like these – which are widely understood also by Esperanto speakers who are non-native speakers of English and which denote an apprehension of Esperanto through English – end up gaining ground even though they do not follow the grammatical norms of Esperanto.

The Duolingo language courses are organised in a tree-like structure, in which the learners reach the next level of the course after unlocking bonus skills and reaching checkpoints, being awarded a trophy at the end. This design – added to the rationality of Esperanto, as Cédric emphasised – conveys the language learning process as a game. Its playfulness is also highlighted by a comparison between how people learn Esperanto and Klingon (the language from the television series Star Trek) online (Gobbo 2005) – and, in this sense, it is worth noting that Duolingo also offers a High Valyrian (from the television series Game of Thrones) course since 2017 and Klingon since 2018. Once one finishes Duolingo’s skills tree, the challenge has been met and the game is over. Consequently, some people learn Esperanto through the Duolingo app and abandon the language afterwards, without ever effectively joining Esperantujo. There are others who continue to use the language after learning it, but
many of those who arrived in Esperantujo through the internet remain mostly on the internet, only occasionally joining face-to-face Esperanto meetings.

In Maxime’s case, he encountered Esperanto in 2006, but only started learning it through iKurso in 2014. Since then, he has been a very active Esperantist online, regularly addressing the online Esperanto community by posting contents in Esperanto about open-source software, video games, languages in general, grammatical details in Esperanto, wordplays, memes, and news articles published in Esperanto newspapers and magazines. He also writes about specific events, such as international Esperanto meetings, Eurovision, and gatherings held by associations, even though he does not normally attend these events. Aside from posting frequently on Twitter, Facebook, Mastodon, Medium, Telegram, and Reddit, among others, Maxime also has a YouTube channel, where he uploads videos recorded on the video games Minecraft and Second Life, which he plays on Esperanto servers and uses the games as tools to explore vocabulary in this language. Through his online engagements, he joins Esperantujo in a way that is more international than the gatherings he attends at Nicolas’ flat: by posting in Esperanto online, most of his followers, interlocutors and online friends are Esperantists from outside France.

It is worth noting that Maxime also uses Open Office and Linux (both in Esperanto) on his computer and prefers Telegram over WhatsApp. Moreover, some of his online Esperanto-speaking friends are active contributors of Vikipedio, the Esperanto Wikipedia, where they both write articles and translate content from other languages into Esperanto. Many young Esperantists share this interest in online collaborative endeavours and open-source software, and see common traits between Esperanto and open-source: both are rendered transparent and flexible, allowing their users to understand them fully and to occasionally contribute to their development and enhancement.

Studying those who contribute with and advocate for open-source software, Coleman (2013: 1-2) notes that traditional uses of copyright are based on licenses that wield the rights to exclude and control. Building an analogy between open-source software/source codes and international communication/Esperanto, Esperanto, like open-source, makes more room for its users to transform the source code/language:
there are those who find in Esperanto a language they can access and contribute to at the same time, both through simply speaking it on a more levelled playing field or innovating with the language, by means of neologisms and wordplays. The rights of, to a certain degree, transforming the Esperanto language through its use are more comprehensive than when one speaks a foreign language. When Maxime wordplays in Esperanto by creatively using word-formation processes, for instance, some Esperantists may find it funny. He may display a French accent if this takes place in a voice chat or face-to-face conversation, but this will only show that French is his mother tongue, and will not raise critical comments from his interlocutors. However, if he wordplays in English, displaying his French accent, in a conversation with native speakers of English, his interlocutors may doubt his English skills and may not understand the joke, being likely to think that he made a mistake instead, which can result in a potentially embarrassing situation.

As with open-source software, when a neologism is needed to name something new or specific in Esperanto, despite the existence of the language steward Akademio de Esperanto, virtually any Esperantist can have a say in how to coin a new word and can contribute to spreading new words virally. In this sense, when British Esperantists were planning to travel together to the 2016 British Esperanto Conference in Liverpool, some participants of the conference debated in Esperanto, by email, about train tickets, lodging, and the possibility of organising a road trip. During the email exchange, Henrich, a young London-based Esperantist, coined a new word to refer to Liverpool. While some participants were interchangeably calling the city ‘Liverpool’ (as in English), ‘Liverpoo’ (the English word followed by the o-ending that characterises nouns in Esperanto), and ‘Liverpulo’ (a phonetic adaptation from English to Esperanto), Henrich referred to the city as ‘Hepatbaseno’, which is a word-for-word translation of ‘liver’ and ‘pool’.

Reproducing in a way the distinction between open-source and closed-source/proprietary software, Esperanto is thus set apart from many more stable languages that are more closely stewarded by powerful language academies. If, according to Kelty (2008: 10-13), modifiability is what characterises the

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54 For example, for ‘software’ and ‘drone’, which did not exist at the time Esperanto was first developed.
reorientation of power and knowledge implemented by free and open-source software, the same applies to Esperanto, which appears as a language that can be inhabited and transformed, adapted, updated and modified for use in different contexts. Thus, it is not because Henrich created a new word for Liverpool that his contribution will guarantee its place in dictionaries and common parlance, but he provided his group of friends (as well as the members of the mailing list of the British Esperanto Association, where he shared that email) with a new possible word, to be used to refer to Liverpool and, alternatively, to wordplay. As put by Coleman (2013: 13-14), hackers’ and geeks’ creative acts are oriented towards practices that enhance the utility of software, but they are also committed to free speech and to aesthetic experiences. In Esperanto’s case, Esperantists address free speech through the notion of fairer and more egalitarian communication, and the aesthetic aspects of their experiences are also registered in their frequently creative use of the language. This perception of Esperanto as an ever-enhancing, collaborative endeavour is responsible for attracting people like Maxime, who pursue a more collaborative involvement with languages – both human languages and computer programming languages.

By systematically producing and posting content in Esperanto, young Esperantists like Maxime are contributing to the dynamics of Esperantujo online. These online engagements, in turn, have their specificities. On the one hand, by moving the focus from territorial, face-to-face communication to a functional selection of issues and contacts (Putnam 2000: 172-174; Ilia 2003: 327), the internet fits perfectly with the expected character of Esperanto, insofar as it reinforces the international use of this language beyond national (and, especially, physical) borders. On the other hand, it adds a certain fragmentation to Esperantujo. The unequal use of the internet along age lines creates a separation between the Esperantists who use the internet regularly and those who do not, which tends to reflect a distinction between younger and older Esperantists.

The online enactments of Esperantujo are driven by individuals who gather through the internet for a given period of time, usually on online social networks, to share interests and hobbies that they have in common or to perform activities together using the language, such as playing video games, learning other languages or
discussing everyday issues. Esperanto associations, on the other hand, focus on more lasting, organised and planned collective actions – which, as we saw in the previous chapter, are carried out through a social movement-like promotion of the language and regular language use. These tend to be more local, contrasting with the ways in which online settings bring Esperantujo closer to its ideal of internationality. The internet opens possibilities for a virtual everyday contact with people from all over the world through this language, in which Esperantists can exchange messages, make video calls through Skype, or play Minecraft or Second Life with Esperantists beyond French territory on a daily basis without leaving their home.

In his research about online sociability in the virtual world Second Life, Boellstorff (2008) notes that people sometimes join online social networks (or virtual worlds, as the author defines Second Life) to connect and exchange messages with actual-world, offline friends. The majority of the friendships of people online, however, originates in online environments – and, in most cases, remain online, with people rarely turning them into offline, face-to-face friendships. The same applies to Esperantujo: if Maxime could easily codeswitch between Esperanto and French in face-to-face conversations with Cédric or Nicolas, when he is chatting with his online friends – usually through text, more than voice – his exchanges tend to be entirely in Esperanto. This language use brings Esperanto closer to its expected internationality as it enables a regular contact with fellow Esperantists who are national others. In Boellstorff’s words, regarding friendship in online worlds: ‘Many spoke of the pleasure of making friends from different countries whom they never would have met were it not for Second Life, and also persons from different social backgrounds’ (2008: 159). However, it is important to note that online and offline Esperantujo are not completely disconnected and that these online settings are not invariably international: some local events are announced on Facebook or Meetup and later take place in Paris or elsewhere, such as the picnics occasionally organised by Espéranto France over the summer.

Nonetheless, as we could see from the party held at Espéranto France’s headquarters, while online communication technologies have helped to attract new speakers to Esperanto, these young people who first learn and engage with the language online rarely go on to become active members of associations. For example, SAT used to
have the *Junulfako*, its youth group, which remained active and published its own regular magazine until 2003. After that year, the closure of the *Junulfako* led to a relative absence of young members at present-day SAT.\textsuperscript{55} Espéranto France, in turn, has JEFO as its youth branch, but the discussion about its possible closure indicates the current inactivity of this association. Even though Cédric and Nicolas are also JEFO members, their informal gatherings are not announced on the association’s Facebook group, and its website is not regularly updated. Thus, even the association’s members tend not to rely on the mediating role attributed to associations, using Esperanto through less institutionalised networks instead.

With different engagements come different perspectives. Since the youth’s activities in Paris are not often translated into active membership or volunteering in associations, many of the Esperantists whose engagements are restricted to the associative milieu – which comprises mostly the older ones, who do not usually use Esperanto online – do not have a grasp of the breadth of these less institutionalised youth networks, both online and offline. For most (older) members of Espéranto France and of SAT, youth engagement with Esperanto in Paris seems close to inexistent – whereas, for Cédric, Maxime and Nicolas, it could not be more active and lively.

This concern about a weak youth engagement via the conventional settings that constitute Esperantujo is not exclusive to France. Mark Fettes, president of UEA, approached the ageing of certain enactments of Esperantujo at the global level in his opening speech at the 103\textsuperscript{rd} Universal Congress of Esperanto, in Lisbon, in 2018. When talking about the more than one million people – mostly young – enrolled on the online Esperanto course at Duolingo, he regretted that most of them have not been attending UEA’s annual congresses:

> We all probably know the statistics, according to which, every year, hundreds of thousands of online learners decide to start learning Esperanto. We don’t know much about their reasons for making this choice, but we probably share similar reasons to do so: curiosity, idealism, interest in languages, willingness to learn. And, as in every course, only some of them continue their study or reach the end of their first course of study […]. We can’t expect that more than 5 or 10 per cent of these

\textsuperscript{55} In regard to generational issues, it is interesting to notice that Jakov, the last president of SAT’s *Junulfako*, is the current president of SAT. When his generation came of age, there was no subsequent generation of young people to maintain this youth group.
learners will persist until reaching a basic level of competence. However, five per cent of one million people means 50,000 new potential Esperantists [...]. But these 50,000 are not here among us; neither 5,000 nor 500 of these newbies. Of course I’m not saying that one has to take part in the Universal Congress to become a real Esperantist! But we are allowed to expect that some of these people who find their ways to Esperanto would find their way here, to our biggest cultural party, the most striking proof of the vitality of our language, its people and its traditions. I have no doubt that, among us, today, there are some of those who started studying Esperanto online and who joined the movement little by little. Welcome to you, make yourself at home! But we have to think about those many others who are missing [here] (Fettes 2018: 2).

In an Esperantujo with a decreasing proportion of older, association-based Esperantists – who are more likely to engage with Esperanto through the lenses of a political cause and of activism, but who are becoming less active due to ageing – and a growing quantity of polyglots, physicists, mathematicians and computer scientists learning Esperanto online who are attracted by its logic and rationality, as highlighted by Cédric, the changes in the general picture of this community reveal how the spread and use of the language are closely linked to the development of the means of communication. If associations had once been essential to Esperantujo for providing contact lists with Esperantists’ postal addresses and for creating settings for face-to-face engagement with the language (through stalls, congresses, classes, debates, and meetings of all sorts), this engagement has now been rendered less and less dependent of the mediation of associations, at least for young speakers. For young Esperantists, letters, postcards, magazines and address lists are giving way to online communication. Consequently, the internet has gained ground as a mediator that partially replaces associations for Esperantists of a certain age group.

These new possibilities of online engagement brought to Esperanto are also expressed through internet memes. One of these consists of a humorous image depicting the fragmentation between the ‘old’ and the ‘new Esperantujo’ [Figure 14].
Despite the importance of the internet in providing tools for the popularisation of Esperanto among young people, it also carries with it other consequences. These young speakers – who are often polyglots, mathematicians, video game aficionados, and people described as nerds and geeks due to their interest in technology and non-mainstream intellectual activities – stand for a growing tendency of deinstitutionalisation, which produces great concern in long-standing association members.

In this way, generations and age groups play a major role in the forms of engagement with Esperanto and the organisation of this community. To analyse the significance of age in Esperantujo, let us look briefly at the early days of the youth Esperanto movement, focusing on JEFO. This youth section of Espéranto France brings together the institutional character of the ‘old Esperantujo’ and the age composition of the ‘new’ one and makes room for us to analyse how institutionalisation, language variation and different engagements with the language are manifested along age lines in France.

Fig. 14: A meme in Esperanto depicting, in a comic way, the old and the new Esperanto community. The former, in agony, is summarised under the labels old people, real life, boring meetings, UEA, congresses, activism and friendship. The latter, strong and shining, is represented by the words internet, memes, irony, YouTube, young people, Telegram, video games, coolness, future [Source: Group Esperantujo on Telegram, retrieved June 2018].
4.3. Mind the gap

The origins of the international youth Esperanto movement dates back to the 1920s, institutionalised in the embryonic association that later became TEJO (see Lins 1974; Fians 2017b). Headquartered in Rotterdam (just like UEA), TEJO aims to promote Esperanto among young people and to hold youth-oriented congresses and festivals. This association was inactive for several years during the Second World War, being reactivated in the late 1940s. JEFO, in turn, was founded in the late 1960s, and for years gathered the Esperantist youth in France and established and held FESTO, at first annually, and then irregularly. As these Esperanto youth associations promote the use of Esperanto among young people, they also institutionalise and reinforce an age-based separation within Esperantuo: as previously mentioned, JEFO’s statute (2000) states that one has to be 30 years old or younger to be a member.\(^\text{56}\)

In discussing age groups and age-based segmentations, Ariès, in his *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), shows how the distinction among ‘ages of life’ became more and more central in the West, insofar as a correspondence was established between biological phases of human development and specific social functions and expectations attributed to each of these phases. Since the seventeenth century, children have been expected to devote more time to activities different from those performed by adults. In this sense, schooling played a major role in the emergence and prolongation of childhood as a distinct stage in the life cycle. Just as the idea of childhood was progressively consolidated (and its length prolonged) in modern times, adolescence and youth also came into being as distinct stages of life. Complementing Ariès’ approach, Ben-Amos (1995: 70) argues that the major contrast between medieval and modern societies in the West is that the former did not place much emphasis on the transition from childhood to adult life, and the modern valorisation of this transition has resulted in the consolidation of adolescence and youth as intermediary life stages. At a later point, youth gained centrality in the years after the Second World War in the West. A consumer boom led to the creation

\(^{56}\) In 2016, the age limit for membership at TEJO was increased from 30 to 35 years old. This was aimed at expanding the association’s membership and ensuring that some participating members could remain as members for longer.
of youth-targeted leisure and cultural products, such as music, fashion and literature, resulting in a lifestyle recognised as characteristic of this specific age group (Bennett 2015: 43-45).

The creation of the idea of youth – and of the preferences and lifestyles associated with it – resulted, in the case we are considering here, in the establishment of Esperanto associations such as TEJO and JEFO, as well as of festivals and congresses oriented especially towards young people. Esperanto youth associations gained momentum after the Second World War, marking a distinction between two formally acknowledged and representative age groups: those younger than 30 years old and other, older Esperantists. Due to the age cut-off that an age-based organisation imposes on its members, these youth associations’ membership and regular activities tend to fluctuate more. When one reaches the age limit, no matter how active one is in the youth association (in this case, JEFO), one cannot be a member anymore, passing automatically to the general, non-age-based association (here, Espéranto France). This high turnover brings instability to these youth organisations, causing them to often become dormant during certain periods of time, especially after an active group of members comes of age.

Another issue that complicates this scenario is that the main features that characterise the Western conception of middle adulthood years – such as getting married, having children and entering full-time, career work (as enumerated by Woodman and Leccardi 2015: 57) – frequently also establish the juncture after which young Esperantists are more likely to reduce their participation in Esperantujo. Romain, the 30-year-old Esperantist from the department of Rhône who joined the JEFO administrative meeting via Skype, was the first person who shared with me his concerns about this, when he told me about one of his friends:

Arnaud used to be a member of SAT’s committee, but then his child was born and he left the committee. He used to be very active within SAT, but not anymore, because his kid is one year old, and he can’t go out very often because he and his wife spend a lot of time taking care of the kid. You know, this kind of thing always happens: people of a certain age increase their workload in their job, raise a family, and so on, and then they move on from Esperanto. Some of them keep taking part in [Esperanto-related] things, but not as often as before…
Olivier, from Paris, described a similar experience to me, when I asked him if he still took part in Esperanto meetings:

No, not anymore. I used to go to IS [the International Seminar, annually held by the German Esperanto Youth], which doesn’t exist anymore – nowadays it’s called JES [Esperanto Youth Week] – and it used to be really, really nice. That’s where I met my wife. I went to IS many times, it was very good... and, speaking of associations, it’s interesting that there are mainly two groups of Esperantists: those younger than 30 and those older than 60. In between, people are too busy working, spending time with their families, raising their kids, and tend to almost abandon Esperanto. But young people are there [in the Esperanto community], and older people too [direct transcription].

In Romain’s and Olivier’s perspectives, the French enactments of Esperantujo are composed of a large proportion of young people (mostly students) and elderly people (mainly pensioners). This contrasts with the relatively small proportion of people in their middle adulthood years, which creates an age gap that, in turn, evinces the fragmentation between youth-oriented and non-age-based Esperanto associations and events. This does not necessarily mean that middle-aged adults are less interested in Esperanto, but that their transition to adulthood may also imply the prioritisation of other commitments that lead them to give up on this language (sometimes temporarily) and to become less active in Esperanto settings.

Drawing upon studies that focus on childhood (Hardman 2001: 504; Qvortrup 2009), we can argue that age groups constitute both a transitory period in someone’s life and a permanent form in society’s organisation. An age group has no temporal beginning or end, being a permanent form of a given structure, independent of the concrete individuals who compose it at a certain moment. In practice, this means that when one comes of age, one leaves childhood and assumes a new status in another age group, but childhood as a structural form remains nonetheless. The main specificity of age groups, when compared to gender and ethnic groups and social classes, is that the former are characterised by a quicker turnover of their members. Children become teenagers and adults become elders, such that these groups experience a total replacement every generation, being systematically populated and emptied

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57 Olivier, who is in his forties, is not seen (nor sees himself) as an ‘active Esperantist’. He no longer participates in any Esperanto-related activity nor association and his only regular use of this language was with me, at home, when he rented a room for me in Paris. This did not lead him to a broader engagement in Esperantujo, which characterises his position as falling into the age gap.
In this vein, it is also important to consider the distinction between ‘generations’ and the previously defined ‘age groups’. Generations refer to a cohort of people who were born within a given period of time and exposed to similar age-related references and experiences (Pilcher 1994: 482-484). Hence, individuals born in a particular decade belong to a certain age group only for a certain period of time, but will belong to the same generation from cradle to grave.

From this, we can examine the proportional lack of active Esperantists between 30 and 60 years old as a structural age gap that has characterised enactments of Esperantujo since the 1950s. As Rašić (1994) states, most of the Esperanto associations in Europe that surveyed their members on different occasions over the twentieth century acknowledged an age composition made up of larger number of older members, when compared to the quantity of younger ones. These surveys also revealed the constant absence of an intermediary age group, which compromises the sequence and continuity of the activities carried out by these associations (Rašić 1994: 180-181). Along these lines, Rašić shows that this age gap is not exclusive to France, and leaves an open-ended question, wondering to what extent associations are willing to adapt their activities to make them more appealing to prospective young members. In other words, maybe association members are more interested in playing bridge than in bridging the age gap.

Age groups have permanence, but are, at the same time, ‘subject to change due to changing societal parameters and perhaps also changing size’ (Qvortrup 2009: 27). In this sense, the perceived long-standing age gap in Esperantujo may be increasing in size and intensity due to the developing technologies that are being unequally used by Esperantists from different age groups. One outcome of this is that younger and older Esperantists – relatively kept apart from each other and only loosely connected by the language they all speak – do not usually use it to speak to each other.

In a piece on the generational gap in Japan, Sakurai (2004) describes how youth from the 1960s onwards (in Japan, as well as in many Western countries) were trying to challenge traditions and to build something different from previous generations. In France, the protests of May 1968 show a similar trend, marking the rise of a
‘countercultural generation’; of a mentality associated with the youth and distinguished from the adults’. Putnam (2000), too, delineates how generational changes have been increasing the distance between different age groups in the United States. In these situations, however, the intergenerational tensions that produce these gaps develop between the younger and the older generations at a given moment in history. When it comes to Esperanto, in turn, what is at stake is not only a matter of different generations displaying different mentalities and practices, but also the proportional absence of people in the middle-adulthood years — who are underrepresented both in associations and in online settings. This accounts for a stereotype, remarked on by Olivier at a later point in our conversation, according to which Esperanto ‘is like a game and a helper for travellers, when it comes to the young people, and a hobby or a cause for elders’.

Age gaps are not exclusive to Esperanto, though. Jordheim (2018) presents a similar scenario in his analysis of the Norwegian-based Grandparents Climate Campaign, formed in 2006. Organised by elderly people who fight for the adoption of climate policies, this initiative brings together elderly people and the youth, the past and the future, the two generations opposed in time. By appealing to grandparents and their grandchildren, they deliberately bracket the adults, ‘banning’ the present generation and creating an age gap. The underrepresentation of middle-aged adults in this initiative, therefore, is a prerequisite for their arguments, based on the acknowledgement that adults have failed to make decisions and to take action for the environment. In Esperanto, by contrast, this age gap is not intentional. Both younger and older Esperantists acknowledge Esperanto as the major mediator that enables their engagement with Esperanto and that promotes fairer and more egalitarian communication. However, they resort to different settings and communication technologies with mediating roles: younger people turn to the internet and less institutionalised sociability networks, while older Esperantists tend to resort to associations. In this fashion, as youth uses Esperanto online and in bars, elderly Esperantists continue concentrating their efforts on editing magazines, going to associations, and calculating membership figures, making for different engagements with Esperanto.
The age gap in Esperantujo also has a linguistic dimension, manifested in language variation. Both through the medium of speech and writing, language can be used to mark affiliations with specific groups (such as age segments) and to exclude, deliberately or not, those who do not belong to them (James 1995). In this regard, it is worth noting how elderly Esperanto speakers often see the youth as being the main responsible for lexical change. Nicolas, Maxime and Cédric, as well as the young Esperanto speakers from other countries who frequently communicate with Maxime online, often shorten the standard greeting ‘saluton’, present in the fundamentals of the language, as ‘sal’. Another common shortening is ‘kiel vi fartas?’ (how are you?), often reduced to ‘kiel vi?’. This also applies to a tendency among the youth to verbalise adjectives more frequently than older Esperantists. In this sense, ‘vi estas bela’ (you are beautiful) or ‘la vetero estis aĉa hieraŭ’ (the weather was awful yesterday) are recurrently conveyed as ‘vi belas’ and ‘La vetero aĉis hieraŭ’, with the adjectives in their verbal forms. A similar trend takes place particularly in written online communication, where words like ‘nokto’ (night) become ‘n8’, with shortenings made of letters and numbers, just as the English ‘mate’ that becomes ‘m8’ in texting. Even though informal and innovative registers of the language are present in literature and are a general feature of change in Esperanto (Piron 1991), they are notably more recurrent – and, often, made more salient through practices of wordplay – among young speakers.

These registers of the language that young speakers develop to use among themselves are not limited to Esperantujo in Paris. Most of it is developed in online Esperanto groups and chats, as well as during international Esperanto youth meetings and festivals. An outcome of one of these gatherings was the word mojosa – collectively created and later popularised by participants of an Esperanto festival in 2003 – designed as the shortening of modernjunstila (modern and youth-styled) as an equivalent for the English word ‘cool’ when used as a synonym of ‘awesome’. To be effectively Esperantist, these registers have to be international: they may not include Esperantists from all age groups, but should embrace Esperanto speakers from all nationalities.

Furthermore, youth-based uses of the language among Esperanto speakers are not limited to Esperanto. Cédric, with whom I spoke alternatively in Esperanto and in
French, also used words in Verlan in our conversations. Verlan, a set of lexical varieties of French involving syllable inversions (Lefkowitz 1989: 312), contrasts with Esperanto’s lexical varieties, since these latter are built mostly upon shortenings. Verlan is most popular among low-income youth in the Parisian banlieues (Doran 2007), and Cédric used Verlan expressions not because he came from these areas, but for his own amusement, as part of the pleasure he derived from language playfulness in both French and Esperanto. This playful character of languages is widely explored by youth such as Nicolas and Cédric, who use word-formation processes in Esperanto to wordplay [Figure 15].

![Fig. 15: A meme showing different ways of saying ‘elder/old person’ in Esperanto, from the more common to the less obvious. ‘Oldulo’ and ‘maljunulo’ are the most standard varieties,](image-url)
while ‘grandaĝulo’ (person of an advanced age) and malbebo (the opposite of a baby) are slang, part of a humorous and informal register of the language. This image also circulated in other online networks, such as Reddit and Facebook [Source: Group Esperantujo on Telegram, retrieved June 2018].

From different settings and ways to engage with Esperanto to age-based variations of the language, the existence of such segmentation shows that while Esperantujo focuses on bridging national differences and seems to include and welcome people from different nationalities, as shown in Chapter 2, Esperantists have failed to bridge the age gap.

Thus, Dominique and JoPo were right: there are not many young people joining Esperanto associations in France, which makes it more difficult for them to keep track of new speakers. From their association-bound standpoint, Esperanto, as a forward-looking project, has lost momentum. The image of Esperanto as a cause to be advanced – and, in SAT-Amikaro’s case, also closely related to other left-wing causes – became restricted to the associative milieu, to the old guard of Esperantists. In a scenario with fewer revolutionaries (activists for Esperanto through a left-wing approach) and more geeks (interested mostly in learning the language as an intellectual game and in using it to build sociability networks), the young speakers seem to be more involved with the community than with the social movement. At JEFO,\(^{58}\) the continuous replacement of generations creates an ever-unstable membership, leading to an association that is often dormant. By being subjected to a non-linear, wave-like temporality characterised by a succession of ebbs and flows, JEFO has already been on the brink of being shut down before, on occasions when active groups of young people moved from one age group to another and had to cease being active within this association. Furthermore, as young Esperantists in present-day Paris are becoming involved with Esperanto through different mediators, in diverse ways, independent of JEFO, this association has been inactive for longer compared to previous years.

Rather than testifying to a lack of interest of the youth in Esperanto, these aspects denote a different relationship of this age group with the language. While older Esperantists hold a more structured and institutionalised view of this community,\(^{58}\) Regarding the distinction between age group and generation, JEFO has always been oriented towards the same age group, despite being composed of different generations throughout its existence.

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concentrated on membership and regular meetings, the young speakers emphasise informality and changing locations, holding meetings at different sites in Paris and building community online. This discrepancy is also manifested in the nature of the engagements, as mentioned previously. Esperantists in the associative milieu are more oriented towards seeing Esperanto as a cause to be advanced through activism, whereas young speakers tend to value Esperanto’s playfulness and its character as a mediator that establishes sociability networks. As there is no substantial middle adulthood group between these two poles, this age gap that does not seem to be properly bridged reinforces the segmentation of Esperantujo and breaks its continuity.

4.4. On rhythms, timings and seasons

As young Esperanto speakers hold meetings in changing locations, circulation and mobility once again acquire centrality. Mobility here may be, for most of the time, within the limits of Île-de-France, but it still transcends it when it comes to the use of online social networks.

With the Parisian summer came a surprising change in the rhythm of my fieldwork. During this season, most associations become less active, due to their breaks and also because most of their regular, Paris-based members are on holidays and/or travelling. The youth networks, by contrast, become more active, with young Esperantists from other cities and countries coming to Paris to visit the city, often being guided and hosted by fellow young speakers. Here, again, online resources play a crucial role.

In the summer of 2017, Esperantists visiting Paris often used the mobile phone app Amikumu to contact local, fellow speakers during their stay in the city. That is what happened to Taras, a 36-year-old Russian Esperantist who lived in Germany and who visited Paris as a tourist with his young daughter, his brother and his cousin. In mid-June, he contacted a few Esperantists in Paris through Amikumu as soon as he arrived in town, asking if anyone wanted to meet up.
Launched in 2017 and initially aimed at Esperanto speakers, the app *Amikumu* helps its users to find people nearby who speak or are learning the same language as them. This app works as a directory of users, who are geographically located by the mobile phone’s GPS and listed according to their distance to ego. Each user has an online social network-like profile in the app, with a photo and general information including languages they speak and their level of fluency in each language. From this data, users can arrange meetings or practice languages by exchanging private messages through the app. Currently, *Amikumu* is also open to speakers and signers of other languages (including sign languages), but this app has been widely embraced by young Esperanto speakers. As Amikumu’s founders speak this language and as the app’s name means ‘make friends’ in Esperanto, the app gained prominence in Esperantujo, with 10,833 Esperanto speakers registered.59

Most of the people that Taras contacted through Amikumu were not available., However, Thomas and I replied to his message and met him on the last day of his trip. During the same week, I was also hosting Marine, a 25-year-old Esperantist from Bretagne, who joined us for our meeting. While Taras’ relatives, who only spoke Russian, were visiting the Louvre Museum, he brought his small daughter, and the five of us went for a walk alongside the Right Bank of the Seine. As he affirmed during our meeting:

> Now, you see… I’m in Paris, and the first moment during this 4-day trip in which I have a meaningful conversation with someone beyond my relatives is with three speakers of this weird language. ‘Nobody speaks Esperanto’, but it’s so easy to meet Esperanto speakers everywhere! I never imagined this app could really work, but then… here you guys are! I wrote to you, and we ended up really meeting in person! This is weirdly amazing!

As he made fun of Esperanto and praised it at the same time, he emphasised that, without this language, he would not have gotten in touch with any local people, from France and/or living in Paris. However, through *Amikumu*, the internationality of Esperantujo was temporarily put in place: two French people (from different regions of France), a Russian (Taras), a German (his daughter), and a Brazilian (me), enacting Esperanto-mediated international communication at its finest.

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59 Retrieved from *Amikumu*’s statistics in April 2019.
Just as Taras had organised this gathering through an app, Marine, who I was hosting, made use of another online-based directory: *Pasporta Servo* (PS), the hospitality service that is oriented towards Esperantists and that preceded Couchsurfing. Through the PS website, users can see a list of people (with their addresses) who are willing to offer free lodging to fellow speakers. In Île-de-France, there were 20 Esperantists registered in this directory, who users can contact to share homes and conversations (Wells 2014).

It is noticeable, then, that Esperanto associations are less active precisely at the time of the year when youth networks are busier. Regular association-goers are not in town when fellow Esperantists from other places are around, characterising the summer in the northern hemisphere as the season when the Esperanto community (especially the one relying on the youth) is more connected in a way that is closer to its intended internationality. Furthermore, apart from the Esperantists who travel and meet fellow speakers through *Pasporta Servo, Amikumu* and other network-formation communication technologies, there are also those who attend international Esperanto meetings. Most of these take place during the summer in the northern hemisphere, such as the Universal Congress, the Congress of SAT, the Congress of ILEI (International League of Esperanto Teachers), the Summer Esperanto Study (a week-long immersion Esperanto course), and the IJK (International Esperanto Youth Congress). In these events, the segmentation of Esperantujo along age lines is manifested: even though younger and older active Esperantists alike are attending large Esperanto events during the summer, they are often attending different ones, as some of these are directed towards young people. Regardless of age, however, the fact that the internationality of Esperanto is made more concrete over the summer holidays

not only establishes a certain rhythm and periodicity to the materialisations of Esperantujo, but also marks Esperanto as a hobby for most of its speakers, as a pastime fulfilled especially during holiday times.

The perception of Esperanto as alternatively a pastime and a cause brings us to an emic controversy on the uses of the terms ‘Esperanto speaker’ and ‘Esperantist’. From the associative standpoint, young people like Cédric, Maxime and Nicolas are

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60 There are also large meetings taking place at the end of every year, such as JES (Esperanto Youth Week) and NR (New Year’s Meeting). Even though these take place during a different season, they are also organised during the holiday week between Christmas and New Year’s Eve.
more ‘Esperanto speakers’ than ‘Esperantists’, as they do not engage with Esperanto as a cause – as association members would normally expect. For Dominique and JoPo, the young speakers do not acknowledge the features that characterise Esperanto as more than a language: the regular, face-to-face and institutionalised community, the movement, the set of cosmopolitan principles, and other causes historically linked to Esperanto. From their perspective, if Esperanto is emptied of these, then what is left, apart from grammar and vocabulary?

Cédric, Maxime and Nicolas do not spread the word about this language in festivals and events and rarely volunteer at Esperanto associations. In addition, they do not draw a relevant distinction between ‘Esperantist’ and ‘Esperanto speaker’, using ‘esperantisto’ as an umbrella term that also defines themselves. Yet they also engage with Esperanto in several ways. By using the language face-to-face and online, they build international networks on the basis of Esperanto’s internationalist cosmopolitanism, communicate with national Others\(^{61}\), and learn more about other languages and about national diversity. However, rather than seeing Esperanto’s cosmopolitanism as a cause to be advanced, they read it through the lenses of sociability and playfulness. Through being ‘coolified’ (Gobbo 2018), Esperanto has gained ground among young people not as a cause or a tool to change the world, but as a pastime, as something fun, curious, and intellectually intriguing. In other words, as a language that has been updated to cater for youth’s tastes, attracting new (and young) learners.

Consequently, as previously discussed, the Esperantists who regret that Esperanto has lost its momentum are mainly those who are committee members, teachers and volunteers at associations. Those who are making friends from diverse parts of the world, learning new things and travelling abroad through Esperanto networks see how these Esperanto-mediated practices can instigate productive, interesting and joyful contacts. In this sense, the ultimate element that sets apart the elderly association-bounded and the young Esperantists – and that is enhanced by the abovementioned age gap – is the way each of them engages with temporality in their relations with Esperanto. Unlike association-bounded Esperantists, those who are

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\(^{61}\) Indeed, their use of this language is closer to its expected internationalism than the use made by association-bounded members, who are, for most of the time, restricted to their fellow nationals.
active within less institutionalised networks tend not to think much about Esperanto in terms of the past and the future, but as a present practice, to be made concrete in the Esperantists’ everyday lives.

We can draw parallels between these temporal perspectives held by Esperantists and those explored by Ringel among anarchists and neo-Nazis in Hoyerswerda, in eastern Germany (2012, 2018). The neo-Nazis he studied in this city have a long past behind them and thus have more basis for thinking of themselves as embedded in history. In this sense, they long for a glorious past that Germany once lived and that they try to bring back. This view of theirs is supported through practices oriented towards a distant future and built upon a long-term endeavour. In contrast, the anarchists in Hoyerswerda had started their activities in the city much more recently. Since this anarchist collective had been established recently and since their actions were focused on their own present and near future, they had no past to ground their actions and were, therefore, less likely to base their practices upon a past to be remembered, re-enacted or revived.

In comparable ways, Esperanto associations are standing on the shoulders of giants, which constrains their members to keep up with their functioning, given these institutions’ long-standing history and their expected futures. Conversely, in the case of less institutionalised networks, even though they also share with associations the history that brought Esperanto into being as it currently is, the current participants of these networks, usually young Esperanto speakers, constitute the first generation that learned and used Esperanto online. To a large extent, their experiences with the language are hardly comparable to what previous generations of Esperantists (current older Esperantists included) did and do without using online resources and networks. Most importantly, their engagements with Esperanto as an intellectual game and as a tool to establish sociability networks, rather than as a cause to be advanced, characterises them as being more focused on the present – with temporality playing a lesser role in their engagements with Esperanto. In this vein, the Esperanto youth is closer to what Ringel refers to as ‘presentism’ (2012; 2016, 2018: 8-13).

Ringel (2016: 390-393, 2018: 9) calls for presentism as a way of focusing anthropological studies on solid, present-day ethnographic details, acknowledging a
causal relationship between past and present, but considering that neither past nor future exists in the present, and that neither is predetermined. Such a framework seems to speak to what young Esperantists enmeshed in less institutionalised networks experience in their Esperanto-related practices, since they are invested in what Esperanto and Esperantujo has to offer them in the present. Contrastingly, this does not seem to be the case for those who feel a broader commitment with their associations and with the history of the Esperanto community and movement. To take Esperanto as a cause implies displaying a sense of duty, which these association-bound Esperantists do through practices that are highly informed by past and future-oriented narratives.

From this, my main argument is that these different age-based engagements and the age gap that constitute Esperantujo account for how, from one generation to another, the use of Esperanto has shifted. If traditional social movements posit a linear march towards a given moment in the future in which a final, predetermined goal should be reached (Maeckelbergh 2011) – in this case, the spread and consolidation of Esperanto in the international communication scenario – then Esperanto has lost momentum. This weakening of the movement, nonetheless, does not reflect a decline of Esperantujo, since the sociability networks that young speakers establish continue to nurture the Esperanto community. However, this leads us to a thought-provoking conclusion: that the Esperanto community is being maintained and is gaining force at the expense of the Esperanto movement. The approach to Esperanto as a cause that activists have advocated for gave way, along age lines, to Esperanto as a sociability tool and a language-based amusement for geeks. These different engagements, rather than being historical, take place simultaneously, in the same generational lifetime, such that young and elderly Esperantists are contemporaneous, but hardly share the same space in which to enact Esperantujo, the same rhythm of engagement throughout the year, or the same approach to the language. Hence, despite speaking the same language, sometimes younger and older Esperantists have little to communicate and to share.

These take this particular shape in the case I analyse, but are not exclusive to Paris or France – just as the age gap may not exist in every enactment of Esperantujo.
Social class and political orientations were once the central elements that characterised the schisms in Esperantuo that distinguished a neutral and a left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement. However, over time, together with the stereotypes about Esperantists shifting from revolutionaries to geeks, Esperantuo came to be more segmented along age lines. In engagements that are highly influenced by Esperantists’ age, the more one has access to international communication and travelling through the mediation of Esperanto, the less the temporality that constitutes Esperanto plays a role, as current young Esperanto speakers are seeing Esperanto as a more ephemeral, present-day and present-oriented attainment, rather than a long-term project to be pursued.
CHAPTER 5. ESPERANTO IN THE MAKING, MAKING THROUGH ESPERANTO

‘Practising prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present and a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present’ (Maeckelbergh 2011: 4).

Dominique and JoPo engage with Esperanto within the framework of political activism, as a cause to be supported and advanced, by volunteering at an Esperanto association and by, occasionally, promoting the language at stalls and joining wider Esperanto meetings. Cédric, Maxime and Nicolas, by contrast, engage with Esperanto mostly through posting online and speaking the language, perceiving it as an intellectual game and as a tool to build sociability networks. To do so, they attend international Esperanto meetings and festivals (usually, not the same ones attended by older Esperantists), travel using Pasporta Servo and Amikumu and visit friends they made at previous Esperanto gatherings. Put simply, they circulate, as well as make ideas, experiences and nationalities circulate, through both online and face-to-face exchanges. As we saw in previous chapters, the practices that make sense of Esperanto and turn it into a relevant endeavour for most of its speakers involve establishing and expanding networks – the more international, the better. In a scenario in which associations lose centrality for some age groups, the less institutionalised networks (both online and offline) that compose Esperantujo are, to a large extent, replacing, more than complementing, Esperanto associations. As a result, within the same generational lifetime, these networks make this community more acephalous from one generation to another. In this chapter, we will explore some unfoldings of the networking made possible by this language, analysing how Esperantists and Esperanto speakers use this language in practice.

After looking at international congresses, national associations and city-based less institutionalised networks, we will now delve into Esperantists’ subjectivities – in other words, ‘actual people and their lives, words, and affects – their subjectivities’,
which are at the core of our study ‘both explicitly and between the lines’ (Biehl and Locke 2010: 320-321). From these subjectivities, we will explore how certain Esperantists and their engagements with Esperanto – which may range from activism for a cause to simple language use – provide answers to frequently asked questions such as: what leads people to study Esperanto? How does speaking this language play a role in their lives and how (and to what extent) does it bring changes to their lives and generate new experiences for them? By focusing on present-oriented Esperanto-mediated practices, this chapter presents approaches that dislocate Esperanto from the framework of traditional social movements (as dealt with in Chapter 3) and introduces the possibility of reading it through the lens of prefiguration. As people like Daniel and Martine, Idris, and Julien engage with Esperanto through attempts to build alternative social relations in the present, we will look at their perspectives on the playfulness of the language, on how to render it useful, and on how to see it as an alternative to other means of communication. From this, this chapter will analyse what we gain and what we lose in emphasising discussions on prefiguration (e.g. Graeber 2007, 2010; Marckelberg 2011; Razsa and Kurnik 2012; Yates 2015; Teivanen 2016), as well as what Esperantujo gains and loses with these present-oriented, prefigurative-like approaches carried out by Esperantists themselves.

5.1. Deleuze and the Esperantology of becoming

After arriving one Saturday in La Roche-sur-Yon, in the department of Vendée, a group of more than twenty Esperantists welcomed me in the monthly full-day meeting of the local association Espéranto Vendée. They had invited me to give a talk explaining what anthropology is, which was followed by a communal lunch, informal chatting and board games, all conducted in Esperanto. At the end of the day, Daniel and Martine, who live in a small town next to the coast, 50 kilometres away from La Roche-sur-Yon, hosted me. While we were in the car heading towards their town, the talkative and enthusiastic couple were eager to share with me, in a conversation held entirely in Esperanto, the experiences they had when they travelled
to Brazil a few years before. Having attended the Brazilian Congress of Esperanto, they stayed in the country for longer, as they had been invited by local Esperantists to visit their hometowns and to be hosted by them.

Daniel, who was in his mid-fifties, had started studying Esperanto in 2004, after listening to a song in this language at a rock concert. He liked the song and, later, researching the language, ended up enjoying the cosmopolitan principles and peace-related ideas behind Esperanto. By then, he was working as a Republican guard and lived with Martine and their two children in Paris. Dissatisfied with both his job and their lives in Paris, the couple decided to move to this small town, where Daniel’s parents also live and where he started a new professional career – this time as a home-based, self-employed gravure printer, being helped by his wife. This decision to change their lifestyle, however, was not limited to moving to a new town and changing jobs. They both also gave up smoking and decided to ‘enjoy life to the fullest’. Devoting time to Esperanto became part of their life shift. After two years studying this language and having convinced Martine to do the same, they enjoyed their flexible work schedule and the coming of age of their children and began to travel more. At first, they went to Vietnam, where they used Esperanto to communicate with the Vietnamese Esperantists they contacted while planning the trip. Later, they did the same when they travelled to Thailand, Cambodia, Brazil and other countries, always attending national Esperanto congresses in these countries or contacting local Esperantists before embarking on a new adventure. As Daniel narrated:

We usually meet nice people at Esperanto meetings, and later we want to get in touch with them, to visit them, to host them in our place. So, after establishing contact with these people and making friends with them, we often visit them later. That’s how we choose the places we want to visit, that’s how we plan our trips. We met nice people [Esperantists] from Vietnam, and they said we could visit their country and be hosted by them. That’s what we did. And the people in Vietnam are amazing! And when we travel, we are hosted by Esperantists, we visit the local places with them, but I also like to talk to local people who are not Esperantists. So, sometimes I try to learn a few sentences in the local language and I ask the Esperantists to mediate our conversations with other local people. In this way, we really use Esperanto as a bridge language.

Previously, Daniel and Martine had not travelled beyond Europe due to their children and Daniel’s tight work schedule. Later, Esperanto fitted perfectly with their
intention to travel more, providing them with a vast network of personal contacts that encouraged them to visit more distant places. In our conversation that evening, Daniel highlighted many times that ‘they are not tourists; they are Esperantists’:

I don’t like to visit a place as a tourist, just to visit touristic sites. I like to be hosted by local people, to learn about their customs and their everyday life, to visit the city itself beyond its tourist attractions. And Esperanto enables us to do it!

As they were showing me some souvenirs they had brought from the countries they visited, Daniel also told me that, when both of them decided to stop smoking, they invested the money they would otherwise spend on cigarettes in travelling, and their increased interest in travelling was also ‘thanks to Esperanto’:

We must make the changes we want. There are many people who say like ‘Oh, I’ll change my lifestyle, work less and enjoy life more when my relatives and friends do the same’; ‘Oh, I’ll learn Esperanto when everyone else speaks it’. That’s not how things should work! We have to make the change. So, we decided to change our lifestyle, and Esperanto is part of this change. After meeting nice people at Esperanto meetings, we keep in touch with them and sometimes visit them in their place. Thanks to Esperanto, we travelled to Vietnam four times and, indirectly, also thanks to Esperanto, we quit smoking. We wouldn’t be able to travel alternatively if it wasn’t because of Esperanto. What would we do? Would we wait for everyone else to learn this language? No! We did it, and it changed our lives now!

Daniel and Martine lived in the region of Alsace when they were young and, for this reason, they are both fluent in German. In addition, Daniel lived in the United Kingdom as a young exchange student and can also speak English. These language skills did not stop them from deciding to study another language, quite the contrary.

However, rather than regarding Esperanto as just another language among many, they see it as part of the life-changing alternatives they pursue, linking it with their initiative of moving to a small town and starting their own business. They wanted to travel and to visit the world in a different way, refusing at all costs the label ‘tourist’, and Esperanto played a major role in this. They could go to hotels to experience travelling, but then they would be like other typical tourists. They could contact French friends of friends living in the places they wanted to visit, but then they would not get close to the local population. They could use Couchsurfing to have a closer contact with locals when abroad – in this case, they would probably use English as their bridge language, which would, presumably, meet their expectations. However, being Esperantists enabled them to overcome communication barriers with
certain people abroad and, what is more, it included them in this unbounded network-like community where they can both make themselves at home and be surrounded by national others during their trips. As Daniel and Martine’s choice clearly shows, Esperanto is not the only alternative they have available to ‘make them do’ what they do in terms of travelling. Nevertheless, this is the path they have chosen to follow among many others that were available to them, and is also the way that allows them to do it in this specific manner, through becoming part of a speech community. In looking for alternatives and embedding this language in the lifestyle they adopted, Daniel and Martine are drawing what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call ‘lines of flight’.

Addressing capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the capitalist system captures and channels people’s creativity into the dominant territorialities of the system (Guattari 2016: 99). In this sense, lines of flight constitute ways of breaking through the capitalist system of control and normalisation, allowing what the authors call ‘deterritorialisation’. Thus, lines of flight enable us to escape the status quo not by going against it, but rather by going away from it. Through drawing experimental lines of flight, we generate new connections and open up multiplicities through ruptures that produce deterritorialised possibilities. To illustrate this, Deleuze and Guattari describe the image of the tree and the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 3-25). Trees constitute deeply rooted territories, with roots that grow in a certain direction and branches and leaves that flourish towards sunlight. Rhizomes, in turn, are deterritorialised: they have no beginning or end and are composed of lines of flight that develop in any direction, assuming forms that are neither fixed nor well-established. Any point of a rhizome can connect to anything else, whereas trees and roots fix an order and establish a structure. As lines of flight reveal open spaces, they open up for multiple creative trajectories, but these are open-ended – if they become goal-oriented or structured, their flows are captured and they are territorialised again.

For Daniel and Martine, Esperanto provides lines of flight as it acts as an escape route, an open-ended way out of their previous lifestyle. Learning Esperanto probably would not help them to live in another country or to achieve a better position in the job market. Rather, it could open up possibilities that are neither fixed nor well-established, thus contributing to rupturing with and deterritorialising their
previous lifestyle by bringing about unforeseen changes. As with any line of flight, Esperanto defines the multiplicities they will engage with – in this case, as discussed in Chapter 2, the multiplicity to be addressed relates to (inter)national diversity. Still following Deleuze and Guattari:

The line of flight marks: the reality of a finite number of dimensions that the multiplicity effectively fills [...] and the possibility and necessity of flattening all of the multiplicities on a single plane of consistency or exteriority, regardless of their number of dimensions (1987: 9).

Hence, for Daniel and Martine, insofar as Esperanto opens up for their appreciation and celebration of a given, international multiplicity, it also restricts and flattens the multiplicities to be addressed, subsuming them under the label ‘(inter)national diversity’. Nonetheless, as a rhizome, the couple can also connect this line of flight with nearly anything else – for instance, with their willingness to travel abroad and to learn more about the world.

Unpacking this couple’s engagement with Esperanto, we see that Daniel and Martine often repeated that Esperanto ‘enabled them’ to meet certain people and to do certain things in an alternative way. Juxtaposing their use of the verb ‘to enable’ with Latour’s comments on the transitive form of the expression ‘making do’ (2005: 216-217) can be of use for our analysis. Latour comments on ‘making do’ as in ‘X making Y do Z’ – which, in this case, relates to Esperanto making this couple do what they do, the way they do. Latour stresses that this is not simply a matter of ‘causing’ or ‘doing’ something, but of attaching something to the actors involved, impelling their action and making room for them to act. Here, Esperanto enables Daniel and Martine to travel and to be cosmopolitans in practice, in ways they would possibly not do otherwise. They wanted to change their lifestyle, and Esperanto was the mediator that pushed them to orient part of this change towards communicating internationally and travelling beyond Europe.

In many ways, Esperanto ended up making them do more than they had originally thought. At first, they were looking for alternatives and became unambitiously interested in studying this language. Later, Esperanto provided them with lines of flight: they became increasingly involved with it, not only speaking the language, but also joining the Esperanto community, to the point that the events they attended, the
Esperantists they met and the friends they made impelled them to attribute new values to circulation and travelling. In delving into Esperantujo, this couple, who used to spend their family holidays in Alsace with Martine’s family, came to prioritise international travelling and communication more than before. After mobilising their Esperanto networks to visit Vietnam many times, as well as Cambodia, Brazil, Togo and other places, their most recent trip was to attend the 2018 Universal Congress of Esperanto, in Portugal.

Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, Razsa and Kurnik (2012) describe the practices of the Occupy Movement in Slovenia, focusing on how the participants in this mobilisation were largely engaged ‘in self-conscious processes of becoming-other-than-it-now-is in an open-ended manner’ (2012: 250). Rather than seeking social change, these participants were working their selves and experimenting with different practices. In a similar fashion, Daniel and Martine’s ‘process of becoming’ Esperantists also involved an open-ended process of working their selves and of making sense of internationality in practice. Through the connections they established through Esperanto, the language made them engage with the world in a different way.

In our conversation in their house that evening, Martine told me:

Daniel keeps repeating: so and so happened thanks to Esperanto. That’s also what’s written on the sticker in our car: ‘The crazy grandparents travel differently/alternatively thanks to Esperanto’63. Daniel loves talking about how Esperanto changed our lives, enabled us to meet many great people…

For them – as well as for many other Esperantists – Esperanto is something that enables people to do something; that makes them do, in the sense of impelling them, by adding something to their initial drive to act. From this perspective, Esperanto is not a future-oriented cause to be advanced, but rather something that already operates changes in the lives of those who use it in practice. When Daniel mentioned his parents, who live nearby, he criticised them for doing nothing with the free time they

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63 Interestingly, the sticker is in Esperanto: ‘La frenezaj geavoj alimaniere vojaĝas danke al Esperanto’. This idea of travelling differently stems from the French ‘voyager autrement’ – which, just like the more popular ‘faire autrement’ (a rather common motto in the associative milieu), entails a quest for alternatives. On the one hand, this sticker being in Esperanto means French speakers may not understand it, but, on the other hand, it may make people curious about what language it is written in.
have as pensioners. Daniel, by contrast, keeps travelling, making new friends and having more experiences ‘thanks to Esperanto’. Learning and experiencing now, in the present, are shown by the couple’s narrative as imperatives, and the contacts they established through Esperanto enable them to keep in their lives in this small town some of the aspects of their life in Paris, such as diversity, internationality and the frequent possibility of meeting new people, as well as learning and having enriching experiences. Yet, this time, they draw these experiences from their being Esperantists and from feeling that they belong to this community. When Daniel says that ‘we must make the changes we want’, rather than waiting for everyone else to study the language, he is engaging with Esperanto in practice, in a very experimental way. In using the language regularly and in actively joining Esperantujo, the couple are not only being Esperanto speakers, but also Esperantists.

Esperanto provides Daniel and Martine with lines of flight, from which they work their selves right now and here⁶⁴ by orienting their practices towards alternative international communication and travelling. When they take part in meetings at their Esperanto association, they are not longing for a moment in the far future in which everyone would ideally speak this language. Likewise, since they only started using Esperanto internationally when their children were adults and no longer lived with them, they did not try to ensure the continuity of Esperantujo in the long term through teaching this language to their successors. Rather than looking after Esperanto through a concern with this language’s making do – in its intransitive sense, of getting by, of the survival of Esperanto – they are more interested in the transitive form of making do, read in terms of potentiality and open-ended multiplicities, with Esperanto making them travel and communicate in ways they had not foreseen. However, there is one factor that complicates Daniel’s engagement with Esperanto. When I visited La Roche-sur-Yon, he was the president of the association Espéranto Vendée. In this role, he was somewhat involved with a time frame that went slightly beyond the present. As he had to manage association memberships, his engagement with Esperanto, normally restricted to the present-oriented use of the language, was sometimes expanded to encompass a concern with

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⁶⁴ In a way similar to anarchists from Hoyerswerda (see Ringel 2012: 179).
the near future, in which he was responsible for ensuring the continuation of the association and its activities in the short term.

‘Thanks to Esperanto’, what seemed to be, at first, simply an interesting intellectual game of language learning became a wider engagement with travelling. Over time, in a feedback loop derived from their Esperantist contacts and friends, this couple’s intersubjective relations with other Esperantists also informed them about a specific conception of individual, that is, as a cosmopolitan; a citizen of the world. By being increasingly encouraged to engage with internationality in an alternative way, Daniel and Martine refused the label of ‘tourist’ and, as citizens of the world, they make themselves at home when abroad through their belonging to Esperantujo, thanks to which they mingle with locals who are simultaneously fellow Esperantists and national Others.

5.2. Doing things differently: Esperanto as a powerful alternative

In line with Daniel and Martine’s take on Esperanto as part of their open-ended alternative lifestyle, Garvía (2015: 115) reminds us that other ‘hidden-world seekers’ – which he defines as ‘people searching for meaning and authenticity not in a distant heaven, but right now and here’ – have historically been well-represented among Esperantists. As Garvía’s study – and, secondarily, my ethnographic data – show, spiritualists, theosophists, scouts, vegetarians, vegans, and LGBT+ are numerous in Esperantujo. However, aside from the ‘hidden-world seekers’, others are drawn to Esperanto through their quest for alternatives of other kinds. This is the case of Idris, who has other purposes in his use of Esperanto.

Idris is Tunisian – and this is the trait that seems to be most commonly used by others to describe him. He is 43 years old, works as a computer scientist, lives in Paris, and has been an active Esperantist for around five years. The way he articulates and presents his thoughts quickly made him one of my most important interlocutors, as well as a close friend during fieldwork. Just as Crapanzano tries to explain an ambivalent personal relation with demons in his Portrait of a Moroccan
(1980), this portrait of a Tunisian will depict a non-compulsory and non-instrumental, but still useful, personal relationship with a language.

Idris was born in a city close to Paris. His family is from Tunisia, and they moved back there with him when he was five years old. After living in a medium-sized city in Tunisia for around fifteen years and being able to speak French and Arabic, he moved to Ukraine to study for his undergraduate degree, following the path of his cousin, who had also studied in that country. Upon arrival, however, he could speak neither Ukrainian nor Russian. Before commencing his degree, he enrolled in a Russian course offered by the university and had one year to learn it sufficiently to start his degree. Despite the fact that his everyday life was to be in Ukrainian, his degree course would be in Russian, which led him to study both languages. Before facing his Computer Science studies, the language challenges he had to overcome made him aware of obstacles in communication, which would be essential for shaping some of his further engagements in life.

As a computer scientist, he also needed an advanced level of English for his degree and, later, for work. Switching between many computer programming languages and human languages, he finished his degree and worked in Ukraine for a few years. Later he moved back to France, where he was offered a more stable position in a computer company. In an informal conversation, I asked him if he enjoyed living in Paris, to which he replied: ‘I don’t ask myself this kind of question anymore. I just live here’. He lives with his partner, who does not speak Esperanto. They do not have children and, as he once emphasised, there is nothing that prevents him from moving again and living in other places across the world.

In a conversation entirely carried out in French, when I asked him about the reasons that led him to study Esperanto, he immediately recalled his early days in Ukraine and his struggle to juggle between Ukrainian and Russian at the same time:

Moving to Ukraine made me aware of the very concept of ‘language’. At that time, I was reflecting on how learning languages is a difficult process, and it’s weird that people sometimes refuse to speak other peoples’ languages for political reasons. Then, a few years ago, when I was already living in Paris, these thoughts came back to my mind. I simply typed on the internet: ‘language simple to learn’ and came across Esperanto. That was in 2011. I immediately became interested in it, because of its regularity. After studying it online for one year, I had the impression that I
could speak it fluently. But I had never spoken it before because I was studying it by myself. I decided to look for places where I could practice it with someone, but I thought I might be the only person in the world who could speak it. Then, I found the website of SAT-Amikaro. When I realised there were even Esperanto associations in Paris, I said to myself: ‘This is the fina venko [final victory] coming true!’ Do you know what the fina venko is? So, that’s it! I realised I could meet people and speak Esperanto with them for real. But I didn’t come to this association [SAT-Amikaro] straight away. I was very excited, but didn’t take note of the address immediately. Then, when I searched Esperanto in Paris on the internet again, I found the website of Espéranto France, took note of the address and went there, visited the place and became a member. I didn’t even realise that I had gone to a different association. But some days later I was in the metro and then I passed by that sign saying ‘Espéranto langue internationale’. That idea about the fina venko came to my mind again and then I realised I had gone to a different place! This one, SAT-Amikaro, was the one that I had first seen when I checked online. Then, I came here again and became a member of SAT-Amikaro as well [direct transcription].

While we talked about his adventures with language learning, he emphasised that the possibility of choosing to learn Esperanto was what motivated him the most about it:

I like French because I have always spoken it. I learned Arabic because I had moved to Tunisia and my family came from there. I have good memories related to Russian and Ukrainian because I made a lot of great friends there and still keep in touch with some of them. It was very difficult in the beginning, because I moved to Ukraine without being able to understand the language, and I couldn’t even read signs in bus stops and metro stations because of the different alphabet. But Esperanto is the only language I have chosen to learn. I had to learn the other languages because I needed them in order to study, to work and to live in these places. I’m not saying these languages were imposed on me, but I had to learn them if I wanted to live in these places. And since I work with computers and everything related to informatics is in English, I learned English to an advanced level as well. I like English very much. Maybe it’s because of my work, because English enabled65 me to work and gave me a lot of opportunities… But I chose to learn Esperanto, so it’s a different feeling when it comes to Esperanto. I’m not saying necessarily that this is my favourite language; I don’t know if I could say I have a favourite one. But I have an affective relationship with Esperanto because of this matter of choice [direct transcription].

Idris does not travel often and never used Esperanto abroad. Yet he managed to meet foreign Esperantists when they come to Paris, which happened a few times, since he was an active member and always attended activities held at Espéranto France and

65 It is worth noting how this use of ‘to enable’ refers to ‘to capacitate’, in the sense of preparing him to do things he already wanted to do, such as finding a job. This is different from what Esperanto enables Idris, as well as Daniel and Martine, to do. In these cases, ‘to enable’ is used in the transitive sense of ‘to make do’, as the language impelled them to do things they did not aim for in advance, creating open-ended possibilities.
SAT-Amikaro. As Idris used to say, he likes Esperanto, no matter who is speaking it, and that is why he does not see a big difference between the political orientations of these associations that had displayed an open rivalry in the past. Apart from going regularly to these associations, he also attended the Esperanto classes at the ENS and joined the young Esperanto speakers in some informal meetings whenever he was invited.

Like Daniel and Martine, Idris also started learning Esperanto unambitiously as part of a pursuit of alternatives. But, unlike this couple’s, Idris’ search was, since the beginning, for linguistic alternatives. After reflecting on communication constraints once he moved to Ukraine, he concluded that language learning processes are arduous and entail exclusions and miscommunications, which led him, some time later, to look for possible solutions to these issues online. Despite already mastering three writing systems and five languages – Arabic, French, English, Ukrainian and Russian – he still decided to plunge into a new challenge and study Esperanto, even though he had no need to learn another language.

Idris summarised his passion for Esperanto with the terms ‘choice’ and ‘different feeling’, opposing them to ‘need’. The previous events in his life, from his birth to his studies in Ukraine, prompted him to learn the languages he needed to study, to work, to talk to his relatives and friends, as well as to live in different countries. Contrasted with these languages’ instrumentality, Esperanto was never necessary for him to achieve his most pressing and tangible life goals. On the contrary, what first attracted Idris to Esperanto was its regularity, its apparent non-instrumentality and a certain degree of pointlessness, as he chose, voluntarily, to learn this language for the pleasure of it.

His continuous use of this language and his membership in associations were confirmations of this choice, which enticed him to make another language-related choice: to learn Chinese. Four years after coming across Esperanto, he started studying Chinese online and, later, enrolled in a face-to-face course.

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66 In a later conversation with him, a year after the end of my fieldwork, he told me that he had gotten a new job that requires him to work for longer hours in a company in a banlieue of Paris. This prevented him from being as present as before, and placed him among the inactive Esperantists in the age gap (see Chapter 4).

67 Idris’ age also places him in the middle of these two age groups, in a situation in which he cross-cuts age distinctions.
Esperanto caused him to rediscover the pleasure of learning languages for the sake of it, as he is neither planning to travel to China nor looking for Chinese personal or professional contacts. But the influence of Esperanto in his life did not stop there. Through the meetings and debates he attended in Esperanto associations, he was intersubjectively constituted (Toren 1999: 1-21; 2012) as an Esperantist by using this language and by hearing and reading about language discrimination and about the importance of respecting diversity from a linguistic point of view. As a consequence, he reconceptualised his experiences with language learning and, more recently, had also been practising techniques of nonviolent communication (Rosenberg 2005) in his everyday life.

If, for Idris, using Esperanto is non-compulsory, non-instrumental, and viewed as a pastime occupation – as something he does outside his working hours, in his free time – we could read it, at first glance, as a hobby. Nonetheless, if perhaps it was so at first, it later grew in importance for him. In one of the regular babilrondoj held at SAT-Amikaro’s headquarters, when talking about languages and media, Idris stressed one of the ways through which he uses Esperanto for practical purposes:

And the striking difference of Esperanto for me [compared to English and French, the languages another participant had mentioned before] is that nowadays people focus too much attention on mass communication. You see, we want to receive all our news through mass media, television, newspapers… Everything we know in terms of news comes from journalists. Also, you see online social networks. Everything is about social networks nowadays. In them, people, rather than sending private messages to a few specific people, prefer to send messages and to post things on their public profiles, on their timelines, so that the information they want to transmit becomes public and everybody can read it. So, nearly everything nowadays is about mass communication. And this is done especially through English, so that the information can reach more people, but also in other languages, like French, and so on. Esperanto, by contrast, proposes something different. It’s more about personal or individual communication, what in English one calls ‘ad hoc communication’. Through Esperanto, for instance, I can write to a random Esperanto speaker elsewhere in the world, through online social networks, and ask them something about their living conditions, about life in their country, about their mother tongue. With other languages, maybe I couldn’t do this. It wouldn’t make sense for me to write to someone in English asking for information about their country because they would be suspicious of me; they would think I’m a weirdo. But it’s possible to do this using Esperanto, because that’s the whole intention behind it: to enable communication among people in a different way, to allow people who don’t know each other to get in touch. So, whereas most communication in English and other similar [meaning ‘national’] languages focuses on mass communication, Esperanto
makes us more open to ad hoc communication. We can get in touch personally, even among people who don’t know each other, and it’s usually seen as an ok thing among Esperantists!

When learning foreign languages at school, students are often presented with a vague idea that a given language skill will be useful in the future – this usefulness being loosely defined in terms of job opportunities and trips abroad. For Idris, however, the usefulness of languages became clear early in his life, but this perception changed when it came to Esperanto. Arabic, French, English, Ukrainian and Russian were to him goal-oriented, as they served certain purposes and were more closely linked to economic needs, broadly understood. Esperanto, however, was not goal-oriented for Idris at first. Nonetheless, it spoke directly to his desire to find an easy-to-learn language, and he found usefulness in it through satisfying his language-related – and, at a later point, his communication-related – desires.

If the other languages he speaks served some of his immediate purposes and needs from the beginning, this time he had learned a non-instrumental language. Yet Esperanto turned out to be useful as he derived pleasure from it, as a passion. Esperanto’s virtual non-instrumentality, or pointlessness, was what made it useful to Idris, as it added a playful, non-compulsory character to the language learning process. Later, in trying to find ways to render Esperanto more goal-oriented, he found the perfect setting for it within his interest in ad hoc communication. From this, his passion for Esperanto was complemented by a practical applicability of this language that, in many ways, increased his interest in and awareness of communication issues. He became progressively more critical about how the use of more widespread and powerful languages, like English, in the media and in social networks is oriented towards reaching wider audiences. From those thoughts, Idris – like many other Esperantists – built practices whereby Esperanto is employed to open up possibilities in terms of ad hoc communication.

In establishing meaningful one-to-one contacts with Esperantists from other countries, Idris uses both Esperanto and the internet to establish more horizontal and autonomous global networks of communication. Even though the online social networks he uses (such as Facebook and Twitter) can serve mainstream purposes, he tries to engage with them as a ‘technology of freedom and a medium for the
construction of autonomy’ (Castells et alii 2004: 246). In this way, he brings these technologies and Esperanto together in his attempts to communicate beyond the one-to-many approach of mass media and the many-to-many functioning of ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells 2008: 90).

Studies of the role played by communication among social movements and groups that aim to oppose the mainstream mass media (e.g. Downing 2001; Razsa and Kurnik 2012; Teivanen 2016) have emphasised how certain communicative processes – notably those related to decision-making – have been based on the dismissal of political representation in contexts of direct action. Razsa and Kurnik (2012), for instance, describe ethnographically how the Occupy movement’s practices in Slovenia enacted different forms of communication and decision-making. Motivated by a perceived crisis of representational politics, the activists in the 2011 Occupy encampment in Ljubljana tried to hear everyone’s voices, rather than electing people’s representatives, through a consensus-based model. In encouraging the formation of decentralised workshops, as opposed to having a central assembly, these activists created spaces for marginalised minorities to express themselves and to take action, even when they did not have the support of the majority of the participants. With these tactics, Occupy Slovenia empowered its participants by providing spaces for them to communicate their ideas and to be individually heard.

Teivanen (2016) also analyses the interplay of representation and communication by looking at similar global justice movements such as the World Social Forum and Occupy Wall Street. Teivanen argues that these activists dismiss political representation, as well as the delegation of power and responsibilities to others, by valuing prefiguration, which implies a congruence between ends and means and posits that democratic goals must be achieved through democratic means (Teivanen 2016: 23-24). Democratic decision-making would be more likely to take place in units of relatively small scale, in which everyone can be more easily heard and nobody can speak or make decisions on behalf of others.

From these ideas of horizontality and of democratic spaces where everybody can potentially make themselves heard, let us return to Idris. Just as direct democracy is
more feasible and likely to be more effective in small units, Esperanto provides Idris and other Esperantists with a space oriented towards smaller and more specific interlocutors who, through cosmopolitan principles and sociabilities, are likely to be more open to certain differences. In these communicative spaces set by Esperanto, every participant has more room to make valuable contributions and to be heard, once one joins a network of non-native speakers speaking a language that belongs to no one and in which no one can claim linguistic authority over other speakers. Once the ‘frame’ (Bateson 1972: 177-193) of Esperantujo is established, this relatively hierarchy-free, democratic communication setting enables Esperantists like Idris to have access to first-hand information about different places across the world through people’s experiences, narratives and personal impressions, rather than through the more impersonal accounts coming from journalists. It is in this sense that communication in Esperanto shares features with that carried out by activists for global justice, insofar as Esperantujo also provides a space in which horizontal, ad hoc communication (in Esperanto) is valued as an alternative to mass communication (in English or in other more widespread languages). Interestingly, the language labelled as universal turns out to realise its usefulness in a numerically limited (Esperanto) community.

Yet, if we read Idris’ engagements with Esperanto entirely through the lens of the libertarian paradigm that emphasises direct action and opposition to the mainstream mass media, we would be led to think that Esperantists like Idris are radically against mass media and see Esperanto as the sole language through which they are updated about world affairs. This, however, is not exactly the case.

A similar risk of misinterpretation due to focusing on a given theoretical paradigm is also put forward by Jansen (2015: 103-118) in his analysis of hopes for the state in a neighbourhood in Sarajevo. When studying the relations between their interlocutors and the state, many ethnographers (such as Scott 1985, 2009 and Graeber 2007) depict the state and its actions as curtailers of freedom and as forces that enclose people under its power. Scott and Graeber describe ethnographically how Southeast Asian peasants and people in rural Madagascar (respectively) deploy strategies to resist, counteract, and overcome state domination. The libertarian paradigm that arises from these analyses, built around hopes and practices against the state and
depicting the latter as an undesirable actor, may reflect some of the hopes of the interlocutors at stake, but cannot be used to analyse every attempt at self-organisation. For example, when Jansen’s interlocutors in Sarajevo recalled the 1992-1995 wartime, they proudly narrated how they self-managed life conditions in their neighbourhood at a moment in which the state was absent. However, rather than expressing a desire to be free from the state, they regretted the state’s absence and concentrated their hopes and yearnings on an expected return of post-war, normal functioning of the state. By engaging with the libertarian paradigm in a critical way, Jansen showed that his interlocutors’ self-organisation, despite also having libertarian features, was mostly a strategy to replace the state during its absence, rather than a tactic to oppose it.

Examining Idris’ engagements with Esperanto from the perspective of the libertarian paradigm, which underlines horizontality and direct communication, renders meaningful his continuous interest in this language as a tool to give him access to information in an alternative way. However, for him, Esperanto and ad hoc communication invalidate neither other languages nor mass communication. As he stated, he is fond of English and acknowledges how this language is important for his work and career. Likewise, he is glad that Russian and Ukrainian enabled him to study for a university degree and to make friends. In addition to communicating with individual Esperantists online, he also reads newspapers and news online, from many sources, in different languages. Hence, his use of Esperanto is not a way to evade or oppose the mass media, but to add a new layer to his access to information.

Drawing upon a Gramscian terminology (1996: 177-188), for Idris, it is not a matter of the hegemony of English (or of any other powerful national language) versus the counter-hegemony of Esperanto. On the contrary, he considers Esperanto as an alternative that opens up possibilities that are not necessarily goal-oriented, and that also allows him to aggregate new knowledge, to establish connections and to make international communication more personal and enjoyable. Rather than broadcasting, Idris chose not to address large, indistinct audiences, preferring to use Esperanto for one-to-one contacts. In other words, Esperanto becomes useful and effective precisely insofar as it is more affective for him, which is also owing to the relatively limited number of people who speak this language and make this
community. Indeed, this usage of Esperanto turns it into a non-hegemonic practice: not something that confronts other languages directly, but instead opens up a parallel set of practices. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology (1987), in making multiplicities proliferate, Esperanto opens up possibilities, but these are not necessarily positive, since this open-endedness also entails indeterminacy (Jansen 2016). Moreover, as in any line of flight, Esperanto’s possibilities are bountiful, but not endless: as we saw, this language may not cultivate a plurality of options when it comes to Esperanto-related job opportunities and to possibilities of communicating with the wider society when living in another country.

This register places Esperanto simply as an alternative to other languages – and a powerful one, in effect, because it works on the basis of affective, ad hoc communication. Esperanto provides Idris with possibilities that the other languages he speaks do not offer – among other things, by allowing him to derive pleasure from language learning. Also, since the community built around Esperanto is a self-elected one, whose use of the language is regularly confirmed by its speakers’ everyday decision to continue speaking it, for Idris, this self-elective character meant that he could meet people who are more open to communicative exchanges through cosmopolitan sociabilities. Aside from making friends abroad and having access to first-hand news through Esperanto, Idris has also been making the most of Esperantujo to improve his Chinese through his contacts with Chinese Esperantists, who have been practising spoken and written Chinese with him online. Whenever he has a question or makes mistakes, he can have his doubts addressed – in Esperanto.

5.3. Deeds, not words

As previously discussed (in particular in Chapter 3 and in Figure 14, Chapter 4), the stereotypes attached to the ‘old Esperantujo’ portray this ‘old community’ through examples of associations and of continuous (and, usually, institutionalised) investments in Esperanto as a cause to be advanced through gathering as many speakers and supporters as possible. In contrast, individual Esperantists such as
Daniel, Martine and Idris prefer simply to make use of the language, being more inclined to engage with the Esperanto community than with the Esperanto movement. By this token, these Esperantists conceive of this language more as a liberal project, centred on individuals. Its liberal quality is reinforced by its speakers’ focus on people’s freedom of choice. In this vein, Esperanto is presumed to appeal to individuals – rather than to governments or to national groups or bounded communities. Such individuals would freely choose to learn and use it, rather than being compelled to do so due to governmental, geographical, educational or job demands and constraints. Just as only individuals, as liberal subjects, can make the decision to engage with Esperanto, any individual Esperantist can play a decisive role and make a significant difference in Esperantujo. In this sense, without a handful of Chinese Esperantists, Idris would not have found opportunities to practice his Chinese skills regularly; without their Vietnamese friends, Daniel and Martine might never have gone beyond Europe. Likewise, without a singer who sang a song in Esperanto during a concert, this couple might never have come across this language and the possibilities it brought to them. The network-like character of this community makes every mediator and every connection in Esperantujo matter, creating a setting in which any Esperantist can bring in first-hand information, establish meaningful and affective contacts, and work one’s selves.

It is within this framework, of a liberal, non-hegemonic, non-compulsory, initially non-instrumental language, that we can draw a parallel between Esperantujo and experiments in prefiguration. Traditional left-wing politics, comprising political parties and institutionalised social movements, are more oriented towards changing power relations at state level by pressing governments, private companies and other institutionalised bodies for social change. The so-called ‘New Left’ (Maeckelbergh 2011: 4), on the other hand – often illustrated, among others, by the mobilisations against the 1999 World Trade Organisation summit in Seattle (Graeber 2009, 2010; Maeckelbergh 2011; Teivanen 2016) and by other alterglobalisation movements that followed – seek change through prefiguration. Maeckelbergh (2011) and Yates (2015) explain that prefigurative politics refers to attempts to construct alternative social relations in the present. Unlike social movements that have clear ends and goals and that aim at macropolitical revolutions and reforms, those based on
prefiguration are closely related to everyday practices. Their participants enact practical experiments involving grassroots democracy, direct action, and alternative, micropolitical power relations. By equalling means and ends and enacting, in their experimental practices, the social changes they desire, these activists are building more open-ended alternatives and acting upon the present.

In Daniel and Martine’s and also Idris’ late engagements with Esperanto, they are prefiguring their quest for an alternative approach to international communication through their Esperanto-related everyday practices. Paraphrasing the suffragettes, Esperanto is for them a matter of deeds, more than simply words – even though the language and most of these communication deeds pass by words. Their end is not to promote Esperanto at the global level or seek support for the language among governments and institutions. Instead, their means equal their ends and are enacted in their practical use of Esperanto to establish connections with other individual Esperantists. Likewise, rather than waiting for a future in which this language would be more widespread, their ideal Esperantujo is already concretely manifested in their use of the language and in their engagements with this community in the present.

Graeber (2010: 123) describes what he calls the ‘anarchist process’ as the process through which the principles of self-organisation, voluntary association, direct action, and mutual aid have been increasingly adopted by a wide range of activists. Graeber also draws a distinction between the ‘capital-A’ and the ‘small-a anarchists’ (2010: 124; 2002: 72, footnote 6), in which the latter are those who tend to operate outside anarchist-only groups, who would not necessarily see themselves as anarchists, but whose practices are based on prefigurative politics. Along these lines, it is worth considering how such an anarchist process also takes place in Esperantujo, among those who prefigure alternative communication through regular practices of making international friends and travelling abroad alternatively, of learning about the world and building informal networks to share knowledge and first-hand information.

As Esperantists draw on prefigurative politics without being capital-A anarchists, the parallels between the anarchist process and Esperanto-related practices are only partial. Firstly, because the anarchist process carried out by capital-A anarchists is
likely, or at least expected, to be all-encompassing: their actions are about transforming society by questioning and ending authority, hierarchy and the concentration of power. Esperanto-mediated small-a anarchists’ practices, in turn, tend to be more focused on language issues and international communication. Secondly, while capital-A anarchists would refrain from appealing to the state and to other institutional bodies, Daniel and Martine may avoid traditional tourist networks (comprising commercial lodging, official tourist guides and well-known tourist attractions), but this does not mean that they are actively against them and that they would refuse to stay in a hotel, for instance. Similarly, Idris may prefer ad hoc, affective communication over the mass media, but he also reads newspapers and browses news websites. In this fashion, these Esperantists are not refraining from engaging with mainstream aspects of the wider society. Instead, they are building something different, that does not deny or replace the mainstream options they have available, but that adds alternatives to them and creates lines of flight that move away from them. Daniel and Martine are cultivating alternatives to commercial aspects of tourism by engaging with affective-effective possibilities, whereas Idris is equally opening up possibilities from the hegemony of information without being counter-hegemonic, but through non-hegemonic practices of information-sharing and knowledge-building. They are not being ‘anti-’ anything, and are barely being actively ‘pro-’ something. Instead, they are celebrating a certain proliferation of possibilities and working their selves through this do-it-yourself spirit that characterises their engagement with Esperantujo.

Ultimately, if we conceive of people’s engagement with Esperanto as prefigurative, then the distinction between the Esperanto community and the Esperanto movement would collapse. However, if we take emic categories seriously, this distinction remains, as it plays a major role in the ways in which Esperantists and Esperanto speakers relate to each other. The prefigurative approach to Esperanto contrasts sharply with the way Esperanto associations – the traditional bastions of the movement – and, especially, the finvenkistoj, engage with this language, as these are more inclined to think of Esperanto as a cause to be advanced. In this way, prefigurative politics is far from being a consensual feature of the ‘old Esperantujo’. Also, as shown in Chapter 4, this distinction between the Esperanto community and
movement reinforces the ways in which age groups differentiate themselves – and often disagree. These disagreements and controversies derive from how the emic definition of the Esperanto movement associates it with traditional social movements, as I will analyse below, when talking about expectations. In what follows, in a critical dialogue with the libertarian paradigm, I explore some of the different shapes that engagements with Esperanto can take when it comes to their temporal orientations. These orientations either relate closely to a future-oriented promotion of the language as a cause, or are focused on the present and acquire an open-ended, prefigurative form.

5.4. A language not meant to become universal: Esperanto as a powerless alternative

In October 2016, during a one-day break from fieldwork, an anthropologist who missed academia attended a conference entitled *The ethical life of imagination* at the Musée du quai Branly. Located at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, this museum, controversial since its construction – classified as a post-colonial place where one ‘unlearns ethnocentrism’ or, alternatively, as ‘the Disneyland of exoticism’ – would become the stage for another controversy. This time, however, a minor one, involving an anthropologist and his quest to take his (non-)natives (speakers) seriously.

During a coffee break at the conference, a philosopher from the École normale supérieure approached me and, as an ordinary academic ice breaker, asked me, in a conversation in French, if I was studying in Paris and what my research was about. When I told her I was looking at Esperanto speakers in France, she received this information with surprise: ‘Oh, Esperanto? Are there people who still speak this language?’ After explaining to me that English has become widely spoken in France and that the French are not resisting its spread as they used to, she stressed that there was no point in opposing English anymore. When I told her that most Esperanto speakers did not see this language as being necessarily opposed to English, she
replied: ‘Ben oui, mais c’est perdu’. ‘Esperanto is a lost cause’: despite everything it makes people do and despite being regarded as a powerful alternative by people like Daniel, Martine and Idris, Esperanto is often perceived – including by some of its speakers – as a powerless language.

Engagements based on prefigurative politics such as alterglobalization, environmentalism, anti-racism and feminism have experienced ups and downs, ebbs and flows, but have been receiving attention even from those who are against them. Esperanto, by contrast, is often listed among other minor causes and dismissed, subjecting its speakers to mockery. In resuming a discussion on conceptions of the success and failure of Esperanto (Chapter 3), we also have to return to two core features: temporality and power. Julien, who displays a prefigurative approach to Esperanto and used it regularly as his working language, was one of those who formulated to me a detailed view on the prospects for Esperanto, spelling out its alleged failure as something utterly foreseen.

Julien was 28 years old when we first met, in April 2017, in Rotterdam. A French national who used to live in Bretagne, he moved to the Netherlands to volunteer at the offices of UEA and TEJO, after graduating in Computer Engineering from a French university. Speaking Esperanto since 2011, Julien had already attended many international Esperanto youth meetings in places ranging from Israel to Togo. His initial drive to learn the language related to his interest in international communication combined with his unease towards English as a compulsory language throughout his studies and career:

In practice, we need English because it is almost imposed on us and we cannot really survive [in the job market] without it. I wouldn’t say people shouldn’t learn it, because we shouldn’t be less skilled due to not learning a language, but English is not a good answer [for issues of international communication] because it conveys the interests of given countries and cultures, and if we use English too much, we may lose our local specificities. […] I don’t like English, not because of the language, but because of how it was pushed on me. In my undergraduate degree in Computer Engineering, for instance, nobody gets a degree certificate without passing an English exam offered by the university. And I don’t think this is fair, because our degree is not in English, it’s in Computer Engineering. And I think it’s possible to be a good Computer Engineer without speaking English fluently. So, the problem for me is how they forced us to learn it [direct transcription].
Julien does not oppose people learning English as a way of having better job opportunities – and he speaks it himself – but disapproves of this compulsory foreign language learning. If he is not happy with the fact that proficiency in a given foreign language should be required, does that mean Esperanto would be the solution for this issue? Continuing our conversation, he said:

If someone asks me ‘why isn’t Esperanto more widespread?’, I would say ‘because you still didn’t learn it!’ But the truth is that learning Esperanto requires some effort. Esperanto is easier than non-artificial languages, but still, it’s difficult. Since it’s not part of the education system, one cannot imagine that half of the world would learn a language in their free time just for the pleasure of it. So I think Esperanto is not going to be widely used if it’s outside the education system [direct transcription].

Following from this, I asked him whether he thinks public education systems should offer Esperanto as a taught module, to which he answered:

When I talk about Esperanto and think of it in terms of feasible aims, for me one of these feasible plans would be to suggest Esperanto as an optional module in the French public education system – but not as a compulsory course, so that it could be one among other languages available for the students to learn. But I think Esperanto shouldn’t be imposed, because I disapprove of the way English is imposed, so if we have an education system that says ‘Ok, so now we’ll all only learn Esperanto and any other language’, then it wouldn’t be better than the current situation [direct transcription].

In an opinion shared by many Esperantists, especially by those who support the institutionalised Esperanto movement, Esperanto may eventually try to gain support from states and public education systems. However, keeping Esperanto as a possibility and as a choice, as highlighted by Julien and Idris, is one of its key traits that distinguish it from other languages and that make it attractive to them.

Imperialist languages were directly imposed on other peoples during colonialism and, indirectly, in many other ways (Phillipson 1992). Today, languages from former colonialist countries in Europe are backed by institutions that act as official language authorities and/or that promote languages and publish language-related materials abroad. These institutions include the British Council, for English, the Académie française and the Alliance française, in the case of French, and many other institutions named after eminent nationals, such as Goethe, Dante, Camões and

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68 Such as the political party EDE, which attempts to gather support for Esperanto within the framework of the political institutions of the European Union (see Fians 2018).
Cervantes. This results in the existence of language markets that generate income by turning language-related materials and courses into commodities, with language being among the most important export products of some countries (for the ‘English language industry’ case, see Phillipson 2003: 77-78 and Grin 2005: 82-85).

In this way, languages such as English, French and Spanish can easily guarantee some prestige and recognition through an ever-growing language industry, in a world where, in Julien’s words, one cannot survive in the job market without English. Since connections between certain languages and power are what turn them into global languages, the same fate may not await Esperanto. A stateless language backed by individual speakers and supporters and by powerless institutions – such as Esperanto associations, subsidised mostly by annual membership fees, and the Akademio de Esperanto, which works on a voluntary basis, with occasional meetings and without producing for-profit language products – finds itself faced with a striking asymmetry of power.

Yet, far from this asymmetry of power being (necessarily) seen as a problem by Esperantists such as Julien and Idris, it is this language’s own raison d’être. Some Esperantists would even take this non-compulsory character further, such as Olivier, the Parisian in his forties who I mentioned in the previous chapter. Olivier’s wife is Belgian and their children speak both Dutch and French as mother tongues. In addition, they also study English and German at school. Since he and his wife are Esperanto speakers and first met at an Esperanto meeting, I asked him whether he planned to teach Esperanto to their children at some point. His answer emphasised that even mother tongues could be beyond the spectrum of imposition:

No, I don’t think so. First, because they already speak many languages and they will learn even more at school. And second, because Esperanto was my choice. They didn’t choose to learn it, at least not yet. I wouldn’t force them to learn it and wouldn’t use Esperanto as a family language because I don’t want to impose my choice on them. If they choose to learn it one day as well, like me and my wife did, that’s great, but I wouldn’t force it.

This view of Esperanto as a non-compulsory language with a liberal character has been present since its early days. Zamenhof firstly envisaged Esperanto, in this aspect, as an antithesis to national languages, which are invested with top-down, coercive power, and that carry with them nationalist and xenophobic feelings. Unlike
national languages made global through the political and economic power they hold, Esperanto is purposefully powerless, meaning it will likely never become a de facto global language. If, as argued by Julien, people can choose freely whether to speak it or not, the possibility of not learning it is also left open and many would certainly choose not to do so. Indeed, if we take Esperantists seriously and give due importance to the centrality of the non-compulsory character of this language, it does not come as a surprise that Esperanto has never replaced French and, currently, English, as global languages. According to its speakers and supporters’ expectations, Esperanto has successfully become a living language and established a relatively widespread speech community, which is often pointed out when faced with the scepticism of some non-Esperantists. On this note, Julien had an explanation for such scepticism coming from non-Esperantists:

I think it’s because many people think Esperanto never reached and will never reach its goals. Still nowadays there are people who are actively against Esperanto, but not as many as before, for sure. I think that, in the beginning, many people who opposed Esperanto were afraid that it might one day really play the role of the international language, being widely spoken and replacing other languages used for international communication at that time. Many years have passed since its creation, and the fact that Esperanto didn’t reach this status became a reason for many people to regard it as something to be mocked, rather than to be feared.

In Julien’s historical perspective, after 130 years of existence, Esperanto did not manage to obtain the support of powerful institutions and governments nor to gather a large number of speakers, thus giving the world the impression that it had failed. This perception of failure also marks frequent qualifications by elderly non-Esperantists of Esperanto as ‘a thing of the past’, with young people not knowing about it. Funnily enough, as young Esperantists do not usually share the aspiration that Esperanto should play the role of a ‘global lingua franca’ in the future, they make jokes about this expectation, aiming mostly at the finvenkistoj and at those who ceaselessly promote the language [Figure 16].
In Esperanto’s early days, when language creation and the idea of a universal language were booming, those who were against Esperanto feared it. Nowadays, by contrast, those who oppose it ridicule its supporters, following the assumption that ‘if it did not win and did not become the universal language yet, it stands no chance anymore’. Still in Julien’s view, the Cold War being over put an end to the most relevant political arguments for this language:

Maybe there were more efficient arguments for supporting Esperanto during the time of the Cold War. In those days, one could promote Esperanto really as a matter of an alternative; of a political alternative: neither English nor Russian; neither the US nor the USSR. Esperanto would create a space between them, where people from all over the world could gather without having to choose sides. Nowadays, since this opposition is not that strong, this argument cannot be used anymore. So, Esperantists lost a good argument, and have to present Esperanto otherwise.

From this perspective, without the possibility of being a politically powerful alternative and without any concrete prospect of its becoming a de facto global language, Esperanto seems to have lost its momentum, being occasionally labelled ‘a
lost cause’ or ‘a thing of the past’. These dominant expectations on the Esperanto movement are shaped by the model laid down by modern communist and socialist theories of social change, which posit a linear march towards a final, predetermined goal to be reached in the future (Maeckelbergh 2011). Such assumptions of a forward-moving social movement based on a linear temporality collapse when it comes to the causes and issues approached by their supporters through prefigurative politics. This contrast is manifested in Esperantujo between, on the one hand, those who see Esperanto as a generator of lines of flight that engenders open-ended engagements and alternative social relations in the present and, on the other hand, those who advance it as a cause, longing for a future in which, through the accumulation of achievements and supporters, Esperanto could fulfil the long-term goal of being used as a de facto global language.

Thus, for those who are more interested in the Esperanto community than the movement, Esperanto’s political powerlessness in terms of being a contender in the international scenario is seen as a constitutive feature, not a flaw, of this language. This lack of political power, linked to Esperanto’s playful, non-instrumental and non-compulsory character, is precisely what makes this language useful, in an affective-effective sense, for speakers like Daniel, Martine, Idris and Julien. Standing no concrete chance of becoming a de facto global language, Esperanto has ‘failed’ – but, in line with Julien’s arguments that Esperanto should not be imposed, Esperanto had always been fairly unlikely to become a universal language in the first place. From the perspective of a prefigurative endeavour, Esperanto has neither won nor lost: it simply created and creates the frame wherein a set of present-oriented practices take place. Such practices, as we have seen, do not confront the mainstream options made available by the wider society and by other languages, but rather, produce new possibilities through a powerless language that generates powerful alternatives, mainly in terms of communication and networking. Unsurprisingly, these possibilities Esperanto generates match, again, with cosmopolitanism in practice. Through speaking the language and joining the community, Esperantists learn about the sets of cosmopolitan principles behind the language, and these are later enacted through cosmopolitan sociabilities. Such sociabilities, just like the very existence of this community, are ephemeral, intermittent and, sometimes, even based on one-off
personal contacts and participation in Esperantujo. However, they operate changes in people’s lives and open up for possibilities that go beyond the enactments of Esperantujo.

Esperanto has been transformed over time, moving away from the label of ‘the universal language’ (as it was initially presented to the world) and being conveyed through more current nomenclatures such as a ‘constructed’ or ‘artificial language’ (more popular among nerds and geeks), and the more linguistic definition of an ‘international auxiliary language’. In line with this shift from its initial claim of universality, its speakers’ profile has also gone through changes, in which the stereotype of Esperantists in France shifted from intellectuals and the bourgeoisie to revolutionaries and leftists of all sorts and, later, to geeks, curious students and retired language enthusiasts. Likewise, the initial humanist approach linked to Esperanto gave way to an internationalist outlook, in which nation-states and national diversity switched from being underplayed to being celebrated. Esperanto, in this process, changed from a world-encompassing project to a more and more liberal one: from the globe to individuals, from macro to micropolitics, and from changing the world to working people’s selves.

For long-standing members of associations like SAT-Amikaro, the loss of momentum makes it virtually pointless to continue their efforts for Esperanto and for the association – if they continue fighting for them, it is because they still hope to regain this momentum, at least partially. For the young Esperantists and for those who engage with it in a prefigurative way, conversely, the prospects of this language becoming a de facto global language is not central to their everyday, lived experiences with this language and its community.

As Christopher, an Esperantist in his sixties who hosted me during a trip to North East England, argued:

Even if there’s no one else speaking Esperanto, it won’t have failed and it won’t necessarily die. All these materials, books, literature in this language have been written, they will all be here and, in the future, someone can find these materials, come across the language, and make use of it again.
'We’re not as numerous as we wanted, but we’re more than you can imagine’. In the end, it does not matter how many Esperantists there are, but how far one can go and what can be done with Esperanto.
COMING TO A CLOSE: TOWARDS AN EMPOWERMENT OF EPHEMERALITY

‘With our brothers and our sisters from many far off lands
   There is power in a union
(Billy Bragg, excerpt from *There is power in a union*’
From the album *Talking with the taxman about poetry*, 1986)

‘Be not immortal as it is like a flame
   But be infinite while it lasts’
(Vinicius de Moraes, excerpt from *Soneto da Fidelidade/Sonnet of Fidelity*, 1939 [1996], my translation).

In coming to a close, I recapitulate some of the main focus of this study, not to summarise what has been argued but, above all, to address my initial questions from the angles proposed throughout this thesis. In the beginning of Esperanto was the word, and in the beginning of our analysis was a broad interrogation of how Esperanto speakers and Esperantists, mostly those based in Paris, understand the potentialities and contingencies involving the practices related to the language they support. From the role that internationalism and multiculturalism currently play in bringing Esperantists together and in forming Esperantujo, the line of thought presented here followed the spaces towards which these practices are oriented and wherein they take place. These include annual international congresses, weekly local meetings at associations, irregular gatherings organised through non-institutionalised networks, and online-based forums and groups that are always available. In talking about spaces and settings, we also talk about times and rhythms: *annual, weekly, irregular* and *always*, which mark the time of Esperanto as something that has passed, will come, or is now and here. Put together, these temporal features address the stability and continuity of Esperanto as a language, community and movement, as these depend mostly on Esperanto speakers’ and Esperantists’ continuous choice to learn and actively engage (in many ways) with this language.
On communication and mediation

As we saw, Esperanto becomes particularly meaningful and is used in all its glory on occasions wherein the internationality of Esperantujo can be fully enacted. In these settings, this international auxiliary language becomes fully-fledged, used to mediate between people from different backgrounds and to enable communication across boundaries. To make such boundaries more evident, Esperantists draw lines between peoples so that they can later cross these lines and overcome the features that divide peoples through the use of this international language. To do so, nation-states and their languages, flags, anthems, traditional cuisine, clothing, dances, music and ‘culture’ are placed under the spotlight and nationality acquires relevance, giving centrality to internationality.

Internationality, in turn, becomes easily interchangeable with multiculturalism: nation and culture are equated through a set of cosmopolitan principles that overlook differences in terms of social class, sex, gender, religion, and educational background, among others. Along these lines, enacting Esperantujo is not about bringing people together through the erasure of differences, but through the display and celebration of national diversity. In these enactments, some differences are underplayed so that others can rise and shine, which makes room for privileging a specific kind of Other: the national Other. In valuing national otherness through openness, curiosity and respect towards diversity, Esperantists develop the core features they come to share aside from the language. As the language mediates between people, it creates settings in which people’s diversity is valued. This is also perceived regarding the use of the language, as Esperantists tend to highlight how the way their interlocutors use Esperanto (regarding features such as word choice, accents, phrasal constructions and use of interjections) convey the influence of their mother tongues and are an index of their nationalities. However, in a contrast that Esperantists explicitily draw to national languages, sociolinguistic varieties in Esperanto are welcomed and seen as a constitutive feature of this diverse, international community, in which virtually everyone is a foreigner. As Esperantists
often argue, in the case of national languages, those who do not communicate using the standard variety of the language may be discriminated against, whereas the standard variety of Esperanto is more disputed and not equally sought.

At the same time, as this community is built, its borders also become clear. While those who have limited linguistic competence in Esperanto may not be able to fully join Esperanto international meetings, for instance, there are also those who are not completely welcome in Esperantujo. This is the case of those whose difference is conveyed not as national diversity, but as peculiarity, and of those who disagree with the sets of cosmopolitan principles that back Esperanto. If, to a certain degree, Esperanto’s current internationalist cosmopolitanism make international Esperanto meetings comparable to the Olympic Games or to the Universal Exhibitions (Malkki 1994; Harvey 1996), they are also distinct inasmuch as Esperantujo also revolves around community-building and communication.

Along these lines, placing mediation at the core of this study drew our attention to the fact that this language works and becomes meaningful to its speakers as much as it connects people and mediates between them, establishing a frame in which their national differences are to be communicated. However, without the settings (such as Esperanto associations, meetings and congresses) and communication technologies (postal services, online social networks, radio broadcasts and regular magazines) that bring Esperanto speakers together, this language’s mediating role would not be properly carried out. Thus, if Esperantujo is built on the basis of this language – which, as a major mediator, gives its speakers reasons to connect and come together – this community can only be concretely brought into life through the everyday communication exchanged by means of a vast array of additional mediators. The latter may be undergoing changes – from an emphasis on letter exchange and meeting attendance to a growing use of social media, for instance. Contrastingly, the centrality of the language in communicating differences and mediating between Esperantists from different backgrounds remains nonetheless, despite language variation over time and changes in the language use, as discussed in Chapter 4.

As we saw, even though the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto revolve around managing the diversity that constitutes this community, they do not manage
every kind of difference. In this sense, communication through Esperanto is also liable to convey misunderstandings and disagreements, particularly when it comes to different political convictions held by Esperantists. Esperanto’s cosmopolitan principles can be easily associated with other internationally-driven causes and political perspectives such as communism, pacifism, anti-nationalism and anarchism, as well as with the defence of universalism, political liberalism, and democracy. In providing the cosmopolitan common ground in which this language can mediate between people from different backgrounds, Esperanto also makes room for those who bring political antagonisms into this equation. Throughout Esperanto’s history, there were two main ways to address the issue of political convictions in the building of Esperantujo. The left-wing, workers’ Esperanto movement attempts to establish a forum to debate political issues through the use of the language, bringing political convictions to the fore. The neutral movement, by contrast, proposes the idea of the fellow Esperantist as being a *samideano*, a fellow thinker, marking an attempt to depoliticise certain aspects of this cosmopolitanism through a mindset of conflict avoidance. Accordingly, Esperantists are encouraged to be fellow thinkers in the sense of holding political convictions that can be harmonised with each other, as a way to prevent open antagonisms.

Nonetheless, once political convictions are either openly debated or neutralised, these Esperanto-related, internationally oriented practices become all the more relevant when the (inter)national diversity of Esperantujo is enacted. In this way, on occasions such as the regular, but short-lived international Esperanto meetings, this language enables national diversity to be communicated. Nevertheless, in order for Esperanto to mediate between people from different backgrounds, a setting is required; a space, in which this can be carried out.

**A matter of space**

The cosmopolitan sociabilities that make Esperanto more meaningful for many of its speakers rely on specific occasions, settings and technologies. This is how space and
communication technologies become entangled, with space being one of the themes that reverberated the most throughout the thesis. In Chapter 1, we saw that locating Esperantujo was the first methodological challenge I faced when outlining this research project. The real Esperantujo, as Patrice and other Paris-based Esperantists told me, resides in the international and, through mobilising this argument, Esperantists pushed me to bring the international Esperanto meetings to the fore of my ethnography, as we saw in Chapter 2. Yet, this real Esperantujo has a limited life span: its concrete enactment takes place for a week once a year during the Universal Congress, and for the same period and regularity during the Congress of SAT, the Congress of ILEI, and the International Youth Esperanto Congress – apart from other smaller and less international gatherings. These settings regularly materialise Esperantujo, but not in a way that can provide Esperantists with a stable space in which to engage with Esperanto continuously. As a consequence of Esperantists not usually being full-time Esperantists, I was also unable to find in these international congresses, as well as in my Tour de France, a permanent field site in which to carry out long-term fieldwork. Which brought us to Chapter 3, wherein an arbitrary and fixed location became imperative. If ‘real Esperantujo’ is the emic category that defines the reality of this community as being dependent upon its internationality, the ‘not-so-real’, supposedly, would refer to its less international manifestations, such as Esperanto associations. At SAT-Amikaro and other associations headquartered in Paris, I was settled, attending regular, weekly meetings, being busy with Esperanto-related activities on a daily basis.

However, as it turns out, these established settings seemed ‘too square’ to some, which set me into motion again. In Chapter 4, I stayed physically within the limits of Île-de-France, but was circulating and following the flows of young people who met and communicated about Esperanto, in Esperanto – or who simply mobilised sociability networks that started with, but were not limited to, Esperanto. In addition, even though I was physically stuck in Paris, my interlocutors and I were also using online social networks and mobile phone apps, both to plan the forthcoming face-to-face gatherings and to communicate with people beyond the city. Such online enactments of Esperantujo, which do not rely on face-to-face meetings and do not necessarily lead to them, are alternatively seen as new forms of the real Esperantujo.
or as poor replacements for the face-to-face community. In Chapter 5, spatiality moved to the background of the discussion as I focused on the personal ideas, interests and practices of specific Esperantists, since the ways they perceive the world and engage with it also shape and are shaped by their experiences regarding Esperanto.

In this sense, Esperantujo comes into existence whenever there are two or more people communicating, online or face-to-face, in Esperanto. Even though this may mean Esperantujo can be everywhere, it also means the existence of an international, ‘real Esperantujo’ is restricted to specific occasions and is not something that Esperantists can take for granted. This community can occasionally be fixed on the map, as in the case of the Universal Congresses that took place in Slovakia, South Korea and Portugal in the past three years. However, as a pop-up community, Esperantujo is materialised for a short period, being wiped off the map as soon as these gatherings are over. If we constantly map all the connections that stand for the network-like character of this community, we would have an over-charted Esperantujo. However, while Esperantujo is potentially everywhere, ‘it is not down on any map’ – after all, ‘true places never are’ (Melville 2009: 107). Faced with this spatial instability, what is left is the certainty that we could hardly find the real Esperantujo in the same place twice, which makes this community unchartable, unless we consider the local, less international enactments of it, which are more fixed.

A matter of power and choice

Esperantujo’s relative unchartability, produced by the short life span and by the shifting locations of the events and connections that constitute it, adds to the instability of this community. This instability, as we saw, is reinforced by the proportional lack of intergenerational transmission of this language. As highlighted in Chapter 5, the continuous use of Esperanto relies on its speakers’ choice (made and constantly reaffirmed) and their continued engagement with this community.
Within this framework, the Esperanto movement affirms itself as an enduring attempt to spread the word about Esperanto, to promote the regular use of the language, and to constantly attract speakers and supporters to it.

Historically carried out by associations, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the Esperanto movement works in ways analogous to traditional social movements, in the sense that it deploys strategies, arguments and materials to advance a cause. This cause is also often linked to others, which, in some parts of French territory, also relate to language-related causes: in the Occitanie region, several supporters of Esperanto also speak and teach Occitan; in Bretagne, the connection is between Esperanto and Breton, whereas, in Paris, some Esperantists see the language as a way to defend the French language against the influence of English. At global level, the Esperanto movement also gather the support of anarchists, pacifists, communists, as well as advocates for fairer and more egalitarian international communication and globalisation.

Aimed at spreading the word about the language and encouraging its regular use, the Esperanto movement has played a significant role in Esperanto’s history. However, as Dominique and JoPo showed, some of these French-based associations do not perceive themselves as being successful in their activism, due to their decreasing memberships. An ageing membership composition, added to a drop in volunteering and to the perception that young people no longer take part in association meetings, stand for an understanding that engagements with both Esperanto and political causes are in decline in France. Hence, from Dominique’s and JoPo’s standpoint, Esperanto has lost its momentum as a cause. It seems stuck between nostalgic recollections of a glorious past and expectations about a bright future never to come, which attests to the failure of the movement.

Conversely, following from the perspectives held by Esperantists like Daniel, Martine, Idris, and Julien, Esperanto constantly opens up new possibilities, especially in terms of international communication. In a scenario in which, throughout history, de facto global languages such as Latin, French and English have acquired their status through political, economic and linguistic imperialism, Esperanto represents an alternative, but not as a candidate to replace them. Its alternative character derives
from the fact that Esperanto is not meant to compete on equal footing with national languages turned global, for Esperanto is not to be imposed onto people and fluency in it is not to be a formal requirement. Remaining a matter of choice means that Esperanto may never gain power to the point that virtually everyone would have to learn it. This, in turn, is a non-issue for those who engage with Esperanto in a more prefigurative way. If Esperanto already makes a difference in their everyday lives, and if it has made them do things they would possibly not do otherwise, why should they be concerned with the future of this language and community if Esperanto is, for them, an everyday achievement?

In any case, even Dominique’s and JoPo’s expectations about the future of Esperanto are less oriented towards a future in which Esperanto would become universally spoken and more towards the continuity and improvement of what they already have. This encompasses the endurance of the association where they volunteer and a dynamic network-like Esperantujo that involves the circulation of people, information, and certain ideas and practices. Those people who engage with Esperanto prefiguratively, in contrast, are more focused on their use of the language in the here and now, regardless of Esperanto’s historical relevance in the past or prospective political role in the future. Thus, along age lines, but within the same generational lifetime, people’s non-compulsory engagements with Esperanto are manifested as an emphasis either on the movement (Esperanto as a cause to be advanced) or on the community (as a communication tool that produces possibilities here and now).

Still, if not many are born speaking Esperanto and if most do not make the choice to study this language, Esperanto’s power to generate a continuous and stable critical mass of speakers is constantly at stake. After all, relying on people’s voluntary engagements does not bring much certainty and permanence to this community.

**A matter of time**
The instability that Esperantujo faces is also expressed and experienced in regards to temporality. I call the international Esperanto meetings ‘pop-up communities’ because their locality is continuously shifting, their participants are not necessarily the same, and even though this community pops up regularly, every year in different settings and occasions, its concrete existence does not last long – which accounts for its character as a one-night-stand community. Likewise, even though there are active Esperanto-related pages on Facebook, forums on Reddit, groups on WhatsApp and Telegram, and profiles on Twitter, the connections and personal contacts that bring their participants together also tend to be short-lived. The limited life span of the connections that form Esperantujo are not exclusive to this community, but are particularly relevant in this case as Esperanto is a language, and its use relies on more than one person communicating in it – which is not possible without continuous connections among its speakers. Even though this ephemerality may bring uncertainties about the continuity of Esperantujo and may compromise its permanence, this is not necessarily seen a flaw, but as one of the core constitutive elements of this community. Esperantujo dwells on ephemerality, and what is more: without it, Esperanto would not be as meaningful to its speakers and supporters.

If we spend all our lives continuously celebrating internationalism and multiculturalism, at some point we would take them for granted and they would no longer play a significant role for us. If we continuously spoke Esperanto, we would not see it as something extraordinary: there would be nothing special about it and this language would become an ordinary part of our lives. In this case, Esperanto would become, in many aspects, a language like any other: a language of customary use, used on a regular basis, as part of a face-to-face, geographically bounded speech community. One of the most striking traits of Esperanto is precisely that its use sets a frame and produces spaces and times in which people leave their ordinary, everyday lives aside for a moment to set their tune to an Esperantist frequency. In this Esperantist wave length, other people, things and places take centre stage and other sets of ideas, principles and sociabilities are emphasised. These practices construct international Esperanto meetings as labs, in which Esperantists experiment with new socialities. However, these sociabilities and practices can only be made relevant if they go beyond people’s everyday lives for short periods of time.
Thinking from this standpoint, at times the fact that Esperanto is a language seems to be irrelevant for what it does. Gamers, freemasons, pacifists, anthropologists, or speakers of Elvish could also equally gather in associations, congresses, less institutionalised networks and online groups, to talk about their interests and the projects they have in common, to jointly practice their activities, and to support their ideas and causes. Yet, on the other hand, being a language backed by cosmopolitan principles makes all the difference: the ways of experiencing Esperanto pass through communication – and, particularly, international communication. Put differently, gamers, anthropologists and speakers of Elvish can resort to analogous settings and communication technologies that play mediating roles, both online and offline, but their major mediator, the element that brings them together – in these cases, a shared interest in video games, academic discussions or the Elvish language – steer their engagements with these causes, interests and issues to a direction distinct from that followed by Esperantists. It is the role to be played by Esperanto as a mediator that distinguishes it from the previously mentioned causes, interests and issues, since connecting people from different national, cultural and language backgrounds is the main feature that steers several people to learn and regularly use the language.

Without the cosmopolitan principles behind Esperanto, Esperantujo would not be a meeting point for nationalities, cultures and languages in which communicating diversity is made central. If one could argue that any language could provide such settings, Esperantists would counterargue, saying that any language can enable communication at international level, but the use of Esperanto is oriented towards actively fostering international communication on a more levelled playing field. Moreover, another striking exceptionality of Esperantujo resides in its ephemerality, which both limits the range and the permanence of this community and allows this language to endure and to be rendered meaningful to its speakers and supporters.
I left Paris in late August 2017. As expected, I kept in touch with some of my interlocutors and friends, eventually receiving two of them on visits in Manchester. One year later, in August 2018, I went back to France to spend one week in Paris and in the south of the country. In a quite intense and productive meantime, I also continued to receive information and updates from Paris during my writing-up.

Throughout that time, and especially in August 2018, I learned that SAT-Amikaro has experienced a certain level of recovery. La SAGo, their bimonthly magazine, started to appear regularly again, headed by some Paris-based members of the association and also receiving articles and contributions from other parts of France – although rarely from other French-speaking countries. SAT-Amikaro also resumed its annual congresses from 2017 onwards, holding these meetings in Saint-Sébastien-sur-Loire (2017), Paris (2018) and Montluçon (2019). This association surrendered to new communication technologies and now has a profile on Ipernity, a page on Facebook, and a channel on YouTube. However, it rarely produces original material to consolidate its online presence: most of this association’s posts are reposts from other social media users and other Esperanto associations and pages. Aside from this activity, SAT-Amikaro did not see notable changes in its age composition, with its regular meetings still being attended mostly by elderly Esperantists.

When it comes to the networks of young Esperantists, those taking the Esperanto course at the ENS created their own student association, Espér’ENS, which they use to present Esperanto to new students, to take part in some events at the ENS, and to receive more institutional support. As before, the young speakers’ activities and gatherings go beyond the framework of associations: the Paris-based youth have also
been holding Esperanto gatherings at the Café Polyglotte, a café that organises language exchange meetings and that made room for Esperanto in its programme. There has also been more collaboration between the not-very-active JEFO and Espéranto France, as young speakers have been using the office of the latter to hold some of their informal gatherings. However, as usual, there have been few occasions in which the participants of JEFO and of Espéranto France are gathered in the same room or event. Also, the informal gatherings at Nicolas’ flat have become less regular.

It was good to go back to Paris after a year and to see friends and old faces again. This trip back triggered another reflection on the stability of Esperantujo: most of those I saw in the associations and gatherings, one year later, were the same people as before. Does this mean Esperantujo is more stable than I first thought? Or does it imply that Dominique’s and JoPo’s discontent with the alleged decline of SAT-Amikaro and the emptying of Esperantujo derives from the very fact that there are not a significant number of new faces? This thesis may not provide all the answers for these last questions. However, since when are the first and the last line of a thesis where the research begins and ends?


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