

Paper

International Language and the Bahá'í World: Esperanto in a “unique record of world-wide Bahá'í activity”

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Abstract

The Bahá'í World, relaunched in 2024, is intended to be a “unique record of world-wide Bahá'í activity”. Its nearly hundred-year history can therefore provide the basis for an analysis of the varying relationship between the Esperanto Movement and the Bahá'í Faith. This article presents an overview of this relationship, divided into three periods: symbiosis (1925-1944), dealignment (1944-1976), and divergence (1976-present). This is followed by a discussion of the factors, including the decline of the wider Esperanto Movement, which contributed to these shifts, while suggesting the role of Bahá'ís in the international language movement today.

Introduction

Bahá'u'lláh taught that an international language would be the basis of a mutual understanding, with benefits both practical and spiritual.¹ Not only would time and cost be saved by reducing the number of languages people might need to learn,² but, following the prevalent “one land, one people, one language” principle outlined by Spolsky,³ the whole world would come to regard itself as a single country.⁴ Bahá'u'lláh prophesied that conditions in the world would eventually make the adoption of such a language by the governments of the world inevitable, and also instructed the Universal House of Justice “either to choose one language from among those now existing or to adopt a new one, and in like manner to select a common script, both of which should be taught in all the schools of the world”.⁵

Within Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime, several individuals independently recognised the potential benefits of an international language and started consciously creating “planned languages”⁶ for this

¹ Authoritative statements of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice concerning international language can be found in the compilation by Gregory P. Meyjes (ed.), *The Greatest Instrument for Promoting Harmony and Civilization* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2015). Only a brief summary will be given here.

² Bahá'u'lláh, cited in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Sacred Writings* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2025), p. 194.

³ Bernard Spolsky, *Rethinking Language Policy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 167.

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *Bahá'í Sacred Writings*, p. 189.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Also known as constructed languages (conlangs), artificial languages (artlangs), etc. For a discussion of the preference for the term planned language, see Blanke, Detlev, “The Term “Planned Language””, in

purpose. In 1851, Bonifacio Sotos Ochando began publishing his *Lengua Universal*, the first such language to attract a following.⁷ No language, however, would prove to be as successful and enduring - or as popular among Bahá'ís - as L. L. Zamenhof's Esperanto.⁸ During His Ministry, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is said to have referred to Esperanto as "one of the special gifts of this luminous century, one of the most remarkable achievements of this great age".⁹ In another talk, it is reported that He "commanded all the Bahais in the Orient to study this language very carefully".¹⁰ Several Hands of the Cause of God learnt and used the language,¹¹ and Zamenhof's eldest daughter, Lidia, herself became a Bahá'í.¹²

Work on the present article was inspired by a comment of a contributor to the most recent volume of *The Bahá'í World*. In a presentation, he highlighted the contents of the very first volume which was published in 1925, noting how many of the topics covered remained relevant in the present day. "Except maybe for Esperanto," he said. This pointed to a prominent relationship between the Bahá'í community and Esperanto Movement in the early twentieth century, which has gradually faded over time, made visible in the pages of *The Bahá'í World*, "a unique record of world-wide Bahá'í activity".¹³ This article provides an outline of the historical relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Esperanto Movement on the basis of these volumes. In doing so, it draws a high-level picture of the nature of the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Esperanto Movement, which can serve future studies in this field.

Literature Review

The histories of the Esperanto Movement and the Bahá'í community during Esperanto's heyday became so connected that little history of either can now be written without some mention of the other. For example, Thorne et al.'s recent history of the Bahá'í Faith in the British Isles mentions Esperanto dozens of times,¹⁴ while Boulton's biography of Zamenhof describes Lidia's conversion.¹⁵ Still, no comprehensive academic history of the relationship between Esperanto and the Bahá'í Faith seems to exist in a widely available format.

International Planned Languages: Essays on Interlinguistics and Esperantology, ed. and trans. by Humphrey Tonkin (1997; New York: Mondial, 2020), pp. 29–44.

⁷ Roberto Garvía, 'Sotos Ochando's Language Movement', *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 43.3 (2019), pp. 325–44, doi:10.1075/lplp.00049.gar.

⁸ Grant Goodall, 'Constructed Languages', *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 9.1 (2023), pp. 419–37, doi:10.1146/annurev-linguistics-030421-064707.

⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Abdul-Baha Addresses the Esperantists of Edinburgh and Paris', *Star of the West* (Chicago), 4.2 (1913), p. 35, https://bahai.works/Star_of_the_West/Volume_4/Issue_2 [accessed 14 September 2026].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ e.g. Adlebert Mühlischlegel, 'Hermann Grossmann (1899-1968)', *The Bahá'í World Vol. XV* (Haifa, 1976), pp. 416–21, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol15-1968-1973.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

¹² Wendy Heller, *Lidia: The Life of Lidia Zamenhof, Daughter of Esperanto* (Oxford: G. Ronald, 1985).

¹³ 'Preface', *The Bahá'í World Vol. XXXV* (Haifa, 2024), p. vii.

¹⁴ Adam Thorne, Moojan Momen, Janet Fleming Rose and Earl Redman, *The Bahá'í Community of the British Isles 1844-1963* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2023).

¹⁵ Boulton, pp. 329-330.

Among the existing literature, the most important work is undoubtedly Heller's biography of Lidia Zamenhof, which stops abruptly with Lidia's murder in the holocaust. Heller's biography is cited extensively by Schor in her history of Esperanto, though she adds some critical analysis of her own.¹⁶ A few other publications exist, such as those of the Bahá'í Esperanto League, particularly its 2009 magazine¹⁷ and 50th jubilee brochure.¹⁸ Though hardly academic, these nonetheless provide a popular history, both documentary and oral, of the relationship between the language and the Faith. Likewise, Paul Desailly¹⁹ has produced a few amateur, self-published works on the history and relationship of Esperanto and the Bahá'í Faith. These books are highly personal and subjective, reflecting Desailly's views and experiences more than the larger picture, but are nonetheless valuable documents which have been cited in certain academic publications.

In terms of academic perspectives on the evolving relationship between Esperanto and the Faith, one is presented by Nordenstorm.²⁰ This work focuses largely on a statement attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá that was published in early editions of Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, where it was interpreted to mean that world peace (and thus the establishment of a universal language) would be attained in 1957. Nordenstorm suggests it was in no small part this prophecy's unfulfillment, and subsequent revisions to Bahá'í belief, that led to divergence between the Bahá'í community and Esperanto Movement. In this way, Nordenstorm essentially echoes Beckwith's earlier attack on the Bahá'í Faith, which suggested that, in view of this statement in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a "false prophet" and the Bahá'í administration had attempted a "cover-up" of this.²¹ The Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre has thoroughly disproven this idea, showing firstly that the statement attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá constitutes an unverifiable "pilgrim's note", of which Esslemont gave his own interpretation, and no authoritative Bahá'í text predicted the attainment of universal peace (or the establishment of a universal language) in 1957.²² This makes the idea that such an "unfulfilled prophecy" could seriously impact the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and Esperanto seem improbable. A somewhat clearer

¹⁶ Esther H. Schor, *Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the Dream of a Universal Language*, 1st ed (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2016).

¹⁷ Bahá'í Esperanto League, *Bahaismo Kaj Esperanto: La Bahaa Religio Kaj Ĝiaj Rilatoj al Esperanto* (Hofheim: Bahá'í Esperanto League, 2009), https://bel.bahai.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/20100201_Bahaismo-kaj-Esperanto_magazino.pdf [accessed 30 March 2026].

¹⁸ Bahá'í Esperanto League, *Bahá'í Esperanto League 50th Jubilee* (Offenbach am Main: Mazloun Media, Druck & Verlag, 2023), <https://bel.bahaispb.ru/BEL-50a-jubileo-angla-Eo-brosxuro-2023.pdf> [accessed 30 March 2026].

¹⁹ Paul Desailly, *Making World Peace Real: The Bahá'í Faith and Esperanto* (Adelaide, 2003), https://pauldesailly.gumroad.com/1/making_world_peace_real [accessed 30 March 2026]; Paul Desailly, *From Babel to Bahá'í* (Adelaide, 2020), <https://pauldesailly.gumroad.com/1/gDehr> [accessed 30 March 2026]; Paul Desailly, *From Babel to Bahá'í* (FB2B - Part 2) (Adelaide, 2020), <https://pauldesailly.gumroad.com/1/TbtCp> [accessed 30 March 2026].

²⁰ Leif Nordenstorm, 'Views on Esperanto in the Bahá'í Faith: A Revised Subchapter in Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era', *Esperantologio / Esperanto Studies*, 7 (2015), pp. 41–60, doi:10.59718/ees52479.

²¹ Beckwith, Francis, *Baha'i* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1985), pp. 37–39.

²² Research Department, Bahá'í World Centre, 'Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era Regarding the Explanation of Daniel 12:12: Beckwith's Allegations', memorandum, 6 November 1990, https://bahai-library.com/uhj_beckwith_allegations [accessed 16 September 2026].

view is given by Bassett in his thesis,²³ writing that, “Since its inception, Esperanto has played a varying, yet ever-present, role in the Bahá'í Faith, as both movements have spread out of their initially regional spheres of influence to become truly global phenomena”.²⁴

Symbiosis (1925-1944)

While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Writings and Talks seem to encourage the learning and use of Esperanto for the purpose of advancing the world towards an international language, He also regarded Esperantists as “receptive” to the Faith and encouraged association with them for this reason.²⁵ Apart from the Esperantists’ support for an international language for practical reasons, many also held to the “internal idea” of the language: that it was “above all an instrument for reducing inter-ethnic conflicts and wars between nations... helping the brotherhood of humanity”.²⁶ Esperantists were thus aligned with Bahá'ís on the need for unity in the human species and inclined to cooperation. The result was a symbiotic relationship: Bahá'ís would learn Esperanto to teach the Faith, and Esperantists would learn about the Faith through Esperanto, potentially leading to their becoming Bahá'ís.

This is seen clearly in the “Surveys of Bahá'í Activities” in vols. 1-8 of *The Bahá'í World*, which make repeated mention of Bahá'ís teaching the Faith at Esperanto gatherings as well as of Esperanto being taught to Bahá'ís.²⁷ After becoming a Bahá'í, Lidia Zamenhof contributed two articles²⁸ to *The Bahá'í World*, both in Esperanto. Though neither directly concern the language, they evidence the depth of Lidia’s spiritual thought and affinity for the Bahá'í Faith which she discovered through the language. Vols. 2-6 contain Martha Root’s accounts of the World Esperanto Congresses taking place during the relevant periods, outlining the teaching of the Faith at these Congresses.²⁹ Meanwhile, as Esperantists were and are widely spread throughout the world, Esperantist Bahá'ís and Esperanto-language Bahá'í literature were able to reach persons of diverse nationalities. Examples highlighted in *The Bahá'í World* include, but are not limited to,

²³ Griffin Bassett, ‘To Craft a Culture: Language Attitudes and the Vitality of Esperanto’ (Boston College, 2024), <https://griffinbassett.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/To-Craft-a-Culture-Language-Attitudes-and-the-Vitality-of-Esperanto.pdf> [accessed 30 March 2026].

²⁴ Ibid, p. 27.

²⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. www.bahai.org/r/459602257 [accessed 22 May 2026]

²⁶ Detlev Blanke, ‘Causes of the Relative Success of Esperanto’, *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 33.3 (2009), pp. 251–66, doi:10.1075/lplp.33.3.04bla, p. 256.

²⁷ e.g. Horace Holley, ‘Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities in the East and West’, *The Bahá'í World Vol. 2* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928), pp. 19–45, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol02-1926-1928.pdf> [accessed 14 March 2026].

²⁸ Lydja Zamenhof, ‘Man and Mankind on the Way of Progress’, *The Bahá'í World Vol. IV* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1933), pp. 474–80, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol04-1930-1932.pdf> [accessed 14 March 2026]; Lidja Zamenhof, ‘La Baháa Filozofio’, *The Bahá'í World* (New York City), 6 (1937), pp. 668–74, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol06-1934-1936.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026].

²⁹ e.g. Martha L. Root, ‘The Bahá'í Cause at the Universal Esperanto Congresses at Edinburgh and Danzig’, *The Bahá'í World Vol. 2* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928), pp. 265–70, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol02-1926-1928.pdf> [accessed 14 March 2026].

Japan,³⁰ Germany,³¹ Iceland,³² and Sweden,³³ which saw significant growth in their Bahá'í communities because of the efforts of Esperantist Bahá'ís and the availability of Esperanto-language Bahá'í literature. In addition, due to the fame of Esperanto at the time, its use by Bahá'ís enabled them to meet with and proclaim the Faith to several famous figures of the day. Root, for example, describes conversing in or about Esperanto with Prince Paul and Princess Olga of Yugoslavia,³⁴ President Tomáš Masaryk of Czechoslovakia,³⁵ and President Wilhelm Miklas of Austria.³⁶

Yet, even during this period, Esperanto was neither learnt nor used by the majority of Bahá'ís. Heller comments:

... the Bahá'ís and the Esperantists differed in the way in which each group believed an international language should be established. The Bahá'í writings stated that in the future the governments of the world and the Universal House of Justice... would choose a universal auxiliary language. Most Bahá'ís, therefore, felt they need not be concerned about the matter until that time came.³⁷

Certain Bahá'ís, however, saw the use of Esperanto itself as an important contribution towards the establishment of an international language, thus hastening the advent of the Lesser Peace. Morton,³⁸ for example, wrote:

... In the mean time, however, there is an obvious step to be taken, if in any way possible, in the creation and voluntary use by all who recognize the principle of one international language, to be thoroughly tested in every way; that when the time comes for final official choice and universal instruction in the chosen tongue, those who are to decide shall have

³⁰ Tokujiro Torii, 'The Bahá'í Movement in Japan', *The Bahá'í World Vol. IV* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1933), pp. 490–93, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol04-1930-1932.pdf> [accessed 14 March 2026].

³¹ Alma S. Knobloch, 'The Call to Germany', *The Bahá'í World Vol. VII* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1939), pp. 732–45, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol07-1936-1938.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026].

³² Martha L. Root, 'The Soul of Iceland - A Bahá'í Saga', *The Bahá'í World Vol. VI* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1937), pp. 684–88, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol06-1934-1936.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026].

³³ Olivia Kelsey, 'Glimpses of Sweden', *The Bahá'í World Vol. VI* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1937), pp. 701–06, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol06-1934-1936.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026].

³⁴ Martha L. Root, 'Prince Paul and Princess Olga of Yugoslavia', *The Bahá'í World Vol. V* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1936), pp. 541–43, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol05-1932-1934.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026].

³⁵ Martha L. Root, 'Appreciations of the Bahá'í Movement', *The Bahá'í World Vol. IV* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1933), pp. 429–34, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol04-1930-1932.pdf> [accessed 30 March 2026].

³⁶ Holley, 'Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities', p. 45.

³⁷ Heller, *Lidia: The Life of Lidia Zamenhof*, p. 154.

³⁸ James F. Morton, 'Esperanto and the Bahá'í Teachings', *The Bahá'í Year Book Vol. 1* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1926), pp. 153–57, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/bahai-year-book-vol01-1925-1926.pdf> [accessed 14 March 2026].

abundant experience to guide them, whether they are to ratify the language already in wide use, to accept it with modifications or to decide upon a different one.³⁹

Morton felt learning Esperanto to be a “divinely given command”, citing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s comments on the language.⁴⁰ He also believed that natural languages could not serve as universal languages:

The objection to them lies deeper than their complex structures, their abundant irregularities, their numerous idioms. Each of them embodies centuries of the separate history and experience of a race, with the past and present phases of racial psychology that have developed. Into each natural language the spirit of a people has been wrought. Its wonderful power of expressing the thoughts, sentiment and ideals that particularly distinguish its own group, is precisely the impassible barrier against its adequacy to meet the needs of other groups... Moreover, the adoption of such a language, instead of allaying the causes of misunderstanding and ill will, would in some measure intensify them, since it would arouse jealousies and suspicions on the part of the greater nations whose tongues had been passed over for the favored one.⁴¹

However, by vol. 9 of *The Bahá'í World* (1940-1944), it becomes clear that the role of Esperanto in the Bahá'í community is changing. This volume includes Gift’s article on how “we have witnessed the transformation of prophecy from ignominy into a scientific and dependable factor for understanding the trend of human evolution”,⁴² noting Esperanto and the emergence of a movement for a world language as among these signs. However, there also appear articles by Ginés⁴³ and Torres,⁴⁴ describing the progress of the Faith in Cuba and Guatemala respectively. Both describe the teaching of Esperanto, but Ginés notes, “Esperanto was taught for a while, but the class disbanded because the young people preferred English”.⁴⁵ Why exactly the young people preferred English is not stated.

Dealignment (1944-1976)

Vol. 10 of *The Bahá'í World* (1944-1946) marks clearly the end of the symbiotic relationship between Esperanto and the Faith, and the beginning of dealignment. During this period, it becomes increasingly clear that the early relationship between Esperanto and the Bahá'í Faith was born,

³⁹ Ibid, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 155-157.

⁴¹ Ibid, 153.

⁴² Maye Harvey Gift, ‘By the Mouth of His Prophets’, *The Bahá'í World Vol. IX* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1945), pp. 869–75, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol09-1940-1944.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026] p. 869.

⁴³ Eugenio Ginés, ‘The Story of the Bahá'í Faith in Cuba’, *The Bahá'í World Vol. IX* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1945), pp. 916–17, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol09-1940-1944.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026].

⁴⁴ Edelberto Torres, ‘La Fe Bahá'í En Guatemala’, *The Bahá'í World Vol. IX* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1945), pp. 922–26, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol09-1940-1944.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2026].

⁴⁵ Ginés, ‘The Story of the Bahá'í Faith in Cuba’, p. 917.

partly, of convenience. In particular, Cobb's article⁴⁶ attempts to present a comparison of "the program of the Bahá'í Movement" with "the vital needs of the world today".⁴⁷ Cobb writes that "the world needs a universal auxiliary language"⁴⁸ and points out Esperanto, reiterating the view expressed by Morton: that a planned language, such as Esperanto, would be advantageous for its neutrality. However, Cobb also claims that "when studied it opens up no world of literature or learning to its students. Many years must elapse before the world's literature would be translated and available in such a language."⁴⁹ Such a claim shows a lack of affiliation between Cobb at least, if not *The Bahá'í World* more broadly, and Esperanto. Most Esperantists would be quick to point out that the language does in fact have a diverse literary tradition including original and translated works, dating back even to the lifetime of Zamenhof. Cobb also makes the unsourced claim that "English has the simplest grammar of any nation in the world",⁵⁰ whereas an Esperantist would be quick to point out English's many irregularities, compared to their own language's consistency.

Esperanto is given a prominent place in vol. 11, as Jamir's description of meeting with Japanese Bahá'ís further demonstrates the role of Esperanto in the early history of the Faith in that country.⁵¹ In vol. 13, Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum's abridged biography of Shoghi Effendi outlines his relationship to the Esperanto movement,⁵² and a passage from *God Passes By* about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visits to the West is republished, also mentioning Esperanto.⁵³ The last substantive discussion of international language and Esperanto is found in vol. 16 of *The Bahá'í World*, which covers the period 1973-1976. This volume mentions teaching and proclamation projects taking place within or alongside non-Bahá'í organisations in Europe, including Esperantists.⁵⁴ Esperanto is briefly

⁴⁶ Stanwood Cobb, 'What the World Needs Today', *The Bahá'í World Vol. X* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1949), pp. 672–79, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol10-1944-1946.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 672.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 675.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 676.

⁵¹ Michael Jamir, 'Bahá'í Encounter in Japan', *The Bahá'í World Vol. XI* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1952), pp. 747–52, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol11-1946-1950.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁵² Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, 'The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith', *The Bahá'í World XIII* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1970), pp. 59–206, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol13-1954-1963.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁵³ Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Travels in Europe and America', *The Bahá'í World XIII* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1970), pp. 437–48, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol13-1954-1963.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁵⁴ 'International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities 1973-1976', *The Bahá'í World XVI* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1978), pp. 131–319, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol16-1973-1976.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

mentioned in Braun's historical essay,⁵⁵ but is examined at some length in Murchie's article⁵⁶ as one of the "fifteen evidences of the germination of the Earth".⁵⁷ Murchie's comments demonstrate the completion of the dealignment process begun in 1944.

Firstly, Murchie states that planned languages like Esperanto have "no considerable population speaking them".⁵⁸ Estimates of Esperanto's current speaker population range from the tens of thousands to the millions⁵⁹ which, though dwarfed by English, Chinese, etc., is far greater than many other languages. Murchie also claims that planned languages have "no government or large institution promoting them".⁶⁰ While this is true, to make this a reason not to learn or support Esperanto is somewhat disordered; presumably, governments and institutions would be more likely to adopt Esperanto, or another international language, if there were already a large movement behind them. He goes on to say that planned languages have "no literature to give them a tradition".⁶¹ As mentioned previously, Esperanto has a vibrant tradition of both translated and original literature. And, finally, there is Murchie's assertion:

... we are left with the natural evolutionary process of the roughly 4,000 known ancient tongues which fortunately are slowly filtering and amalgamating toward fewer and more universal modern languages with large vocabularies and literatures... English in the last century or two seems to have moved to the forefront as the one with the best chance of becoming a truly universal tongue.⁶²

While Murchie does not explicitly endorse the use of English as a world language, he does so tacitly by describing linguistic mass extinction as "fortunate" and predicting that English will be the ultimate survivor of this process. Later, beyond the pages of *The Bahá'í World*, Bahá'ís like Chew⁶³ and Meyjes⁶⁴ have suggested such an outcome would not be in keeping with Bahá'í principles on minority rights.

The most striking point to note from Murchie's article is how it contrasts with the aforecited work of Morton. Whereas Morton endorses Esperanto, Murchie endorses English; whereas Morton considers language attitudes, Murchie overlooks them; and, whereas Morton advocates

⁵⁵ Eunice Braun, 'From Strength to Strength', *The Bahá'í World XVI* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1978), pp. 63–100, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol16-1973-1976.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁵⁶ Guy Murchie, 'The Flowering of the Planet', *The Bahá'í World XVI* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1978), pp. 660–69, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol16-1973-1976.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 664.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 664.

⁵⁹ Ida Stria, 'Esperanto as a Natural Language', in *Special Issue on Interlinguistic and Esperanto Studies*, Language, Communication, Information, 10 (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Rys, 2015), pp. 32–42.

⁶⁰ Murchie, 'The Flowering of the Planet', p. 664.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Chew, Phyllis, 'Whither the International Auxiliary Language?', *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 2.2 (1989), doi:10.31581/jbs-2.2.1(1989), pp. 5–6.

⁶⁴ Meyjes, Gregory, 'Language and Universalization: A "Linguistic Ecology" Reading of Bahá'í Writ', *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 9.1 (1999), pp. 51–63, doi:10.31581/jbs-9.1.112(1999), pp. 4–5.

positive actions, Murchie takes a negative position. He implies that the world need only wait for all or most other languages apart from that which is dominant to die off for an international language to be established, and in the meantime, there is no action which one can take to hasten its establishment. There is no “English Movement” to compare to the Esperanto Movement, and no equivalents to the World Esperanto Association, World Esperanto Congress, or Global Esperanto Youth Organisation, nor, in Murchie’s view, need there be: the world will, simply, run its course.

Divergence (1976-present)

After Murchie’s article, it is evident that the Esperanto Movement and Bahá’í Faith have largely diverged in their courses, having less and less consistent engagement with each other. Eventually, almost all mentions of Esperanto come to refer to past events and developments, such as in obituaries⁶⁵ and an account of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to the West.⁶⁶ There are, however, some mentions of recent activity: there is a description of a “Bahá’í booth” at the 1987 World Esperanto Congress,⁶⁷ and nineteen Bahá’í youth are said to have attended and contributed to the programme of the 1988 Esperanto Youth Congress.⁶⁸ Both of these took place in Eastern bloc countries (Poland and Yugoslavia respectively), and were among the very few opportunities to teach the Faith in that part of the world during the time. The most significant later mentions are in vol. 24, in *Turning Point for All Nations*,⁶⁹ which proposes “the appointment of a high-level Commission... to begin careful study on the matter of an international auxiliary language and the adoption of a common script”.⁷⁰ In vol. 25, the activities of the Bahá’í Esperanto League (BEL) are briefly mentioned,⁷¹ but from vol. 26 onwards, Esperanto is not mentioned at all, apart from to provide the contact information for BEL.

Still, recognition of the need for an international language has not disappeared from the pages of *The Bahá’í World*. In vol. 28, Danesh states that “There were many theories and movements at the time that echoed Bahá’u’lláh’s call for a universal auxiliary language and world government

⁶⁵ e.g. Moojan Momen, ‘Muḥammad Labíb (1893-1981)’, *The Bahá’í World XV/III* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1986), pp. 751–52 <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol18-1979-1983.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁶⁶ Sherna Deamer, ‘The Visit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the West’, *The Bahá’í World XX* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1998), pp. 54–74, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol20-1986-1992.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁶⁷ ‘The Two Year Subsidiary Plan 1990-1992’, *The Bahá’í World XX* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, pp. 195–224, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol20-1986-1992.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁶⁸ ‘International Survey of Current Bahá’í Activities 1973-1976’, *The Bahá’í World XVI* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1978), pp. 131–319, <https://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol16-1973-1976.pdf> [accessed 28 March 2026].

⁶⁹ Bahá’í International Community, ‘Turning Point for All Nations’, *The Bahá’í World XXIV* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1997), pp. 241–84, https://file.bahai.media/f/fb/BW_Volume24.pdf [accessed 29 March 2026].

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 258.

⁷¹ ‘The Year in Review’, *The Bahá’í World XXV* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1998), pp. 55–114 https://file.bahai.media/b/b2/BW_Volume25.pdf [accessed 29 March 2026].

accompanied by greater social and economic justice”,⁷² but Bahá'u'lláh's call was situated in a unique framework. In vol. 30, Vreeland restates the promise of the Lesser Peace: “The maintenance of world unity, within a community composed of members cognizant that they are world citizens, is to be promoted by the adoption of a world currency, script, systems of weights and measures, and a universal auxiliary language”.⁷³ And, in vol. 33, Walker notes that the Roman Empire, during its height, was “united by a common language (Latin)” and had a “civilizing effect”⁷⁴ on those under its jurisdiction. The Bahá'ís of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are clearly no less committed to Bahá'u'lláh's call for an international language, then, even as their attention has shifted away from Esperanto.

Conclusion

This article has examined *The Bahá'í World*—a “unique record of world-wide Bahá'í activity”—to develop an outline of the relationship between Esperanto and the Bahá'í Faith between 1925 and 2021, from a symbiotic relationship (1925-1944), a period of dealignment (1944-1976), and, finally, divergence (1976-present). While in some sense we can see the early relationship between the Faith and Esperanto as a historical accident (or divine providence) arising from Bahá'u'lláh's promise of an international language, the “practicality” of the relationship in fact seems to run deeper. Namely, the idea that learning and using Esperanto could contribute to the emergence of the Lesser Peace was not the only reason that Bahá'ís in the early period learnt and used the language. Rather, they sought first and foremost to teach the Faith using the language, given the receptivity of Esperantists, their wide geographic spread, and the ability to use it to reach high ranking members of society. Thus, the declining prominence of Esperanto in the Bahá'í community could be attributed in large part to the fact that the Esperanto Movement itself reduced in size, both due to the intentional suppression of the language by fascist and communist governments and the emergence of a near-total anglophone hegemony.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the Esperanto community's self-perception shifted from an outward-looking movement for the adoption of an international language to an inward-looking global speaker community.⁷⁶ Therefore, Esperanto's utility for teaching largely faded across all dimensions, and with it one of the main reasons for which Bahá'ís had formerly learnt and used the language.

Also a possible contributing factor was the passing of several Esperantist Bahá'ís shortly before the beginning of the period of dealignment, most notably Martha Root (in 1939), James F. Morton Jr. (in 1941), and Lidia Zamenhof (murdered in the Holocaust in 1944), all of whom contributed articles on or in Esperanto to *The Bahá'í World* and were among the language's foremost Bahá'í

⁷² Roshan Danesh, ‘Beyond Integration and Separation: The Dynamic Nature of Bahá'í Law’, *The Bahá'í World XXVIII* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 2001), pp. 223-264. p. 246.

⁷³ Paul Vreeland, ‘World Order and Global Governance’, *The Bahá'í World XXX* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 2003), pp. 157-187. p. 185.

⁷⁴ Graham Walker, ‘Science and Morality’, *The Bahá'í World XXXIII* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 2006), pp. 177-200. p. 183.

⁷⁵ Marcus Colla, ‘Back to Babel: New Studies on Esperanto, Internationalism and Global Languages in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, *The English Historical Review*, 140.607 (2025), pp. 1486–504, doi:10.1093/ehr/ceag001.

⁷⁶ Michael Farris, ‘Esperanto and the Market State’, *Język. Komunikacja. Informacja*, 12 (2017), pp. 113–20; Humphrey Tonkin, ‘Introduction: In Search of Esperanto’, *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems*, 13.2 (2015), pp. 182–92, doi:10.7906/indcs.13.2.12.

proponents. These comprise what might be called the first generation of Esperantist Bahá'ís, whose lifetimes largely overlapped with those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Zamenhof. Certainly, later generations of Esperantist Bahá'ís exist—BEL has some 200-400 members⁷⁷—but they have been much less famous than their predecessors.

Some have claimed that Esperanto's decline in the Bahá'í community can be partially attributed to the spread of the Faith in South America, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly among poor and illiterate populations⁷⁸. The basis of such a claim is nebulous, as the idea that Esperanto was chiefly popular among Europeans is disproven by its aforesaid popularity in Japan. In addition, the Cseh method, one of the most popular methods of teaching Esperanto, was oral, and avoided the use of textbooks.⁷⁹ Thus, it seems unlikely that the illiteracy or non-Europeanness of new Bahá'ís were factors in Esperanto's decline.

It is also necessary to briefly discuss the religiosity of the Esperanto Movement, as much has been made of the apparent alignment between its principles and those of the Bahá'í Faith. Still, they differ substantially as the former is theistic and the latter essentially agnostic. Zamenhof, raised in a Jewish family, held to a kind of universalistic deism⁸⁰ which was shared by his daughter, Lidia, in her early life, and presented an initial barrier to her acceptance of the Faith.⁸¹ Certainly, religiosity was never absent from the Esperanto movement—Andreo Cseh, the inventor of the eponymous method, for example, was a Roman Catholic priest—but it was never inherent. Thus, in an increasingly irreligious world, it is natural that irreligious Esperantists might be less attracted to the Faith, furthering the divergence between the two.

At the same time, Morton's belief that learning Esperanto is a “divine command” has become largely absent from the modern Bahá'í community, as it has come to understand that neither 'Abdu'l-Bahá, nor Shoghi Effendi, nor the Universal House of Justice ever issued such an explicit command binding on all Bahá'ís, in all places, for all time. Rather, they have each provided encouragement for those who wished to learn the language to do so, in no small part because of its utility in teaching. With this utility faded, the remaining reason to learn and use the language is the view of Morton cited above: that Esperanto should be “thoroughly tested in every way; that when the time comes for final official choice and universal instruction in the chosen tongue, those who are to decide shall have abundant experience to guide them”.⁸² This reason for learning Esperanto, and contributing to the international language movement more broadly, still stands.

Within the context of the current series of plans given to the Bahá'í community by the Universal House of Justice, there is certainly room for Bahá'ís to play a greater role in the Esperanto and international language movements. The Universal House of Justice has written that

⁷⁷ Bahá'í Esperanto League, *Bahá'í Esperanto League 50th Jubilee*, p. 21.

⁷⁸ e.g. Nordenstorm, ‘Views on Esperanto in the Bahá'í Faith’, p. 56.

⁷⁹ Duncan Charters, ‘The Teaching and Learning of Esperanto’, *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems*, 13.2 (2015), pp. 288–98, doi: 10.7906/indcs.13.2.7.

⁸⁰ L. L. Zamenhof, *Deklaracio Pri Homaranismo* (Madrid: Homaro, 1913) https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2d/Zamenhof_-_Deklaracio_pri_Homaranismo%2C_1913.pdf?uselang=eo [accessed 30 March 2026].

⁸¹ Heller, *Lidia: The Life of Lidia Zamenhof*, pp. 71-72.

⁸² Morton, ‘Esperanto and the Bahá'í Teachings’, pp. 155.

the ultimate aim of these plans is “to release the society building power of the Faith”.⁸³ Bahá'u'lláh called the adoption of an international language “the greatest instrument for promoting harmony and civilization”.⁸⁴ That some Bahá'ís might feel inclined to take up the language in this context seems entirely possible.

This article has left largely untouched the period before 1925, as well as the various interactions taking place beyond this “unique record” of the Faith. The activities of BEL, for example, have hardly been mentioned. Likewise, the involvement of Bahá'ís in other areas of the international language movement has been overlooked. All of these are important to understanding the relationship between international language (the broader movement, beyond Esperanto) and the Bahá'í world (the global Bahá'í community, beyond the publication), and could be explored in future research.

Author biography

Morgan Brown began to study Esperanto in summer 2019. This led to them encountering the Bahá'í Faith, of which they have been a member since February 2021. They are currently studying for an MA in linguistics at SOAS, University of London.

⁸³ The Universal House of Justice, letter to The Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 30 December 2021, https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230_001/1 [accessed 30 March 2026].

⁸⁴ Bahā Allāh and Shoghi Effendi, with Universal House of Justice, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas [or] The Most Holy Book* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), para. 189.