

Inventors and Devotees of Artificial Languages

In the Land of Invented Languages: Esperanto Rock Stars, Klingon Poets, Loglan Lovers, and The Mad Dreamers Who Tried to Build a Perfect Language. By Arika Okrent, *Spiegel and Grau*, New York, 2009, 352 pages, \$26.00.

In the Land of Invented Languages is a remarkably entertaining historical survey of artificial languages and their inventors, from the *Lingua Ignota* of Hildegard von Bingen in the 12th century through Esperanto and, more recently, Klingon. The depth of the research is impressive. The author, Arika Okrent, attended conferences in Esperanto, Loglan, and Klingon, among others; hunted up obscure self-published tomes available only in a few rare book rooms; worked through scores of these languages in enough depth to translate passages into them; and interviewed hundreds of people, both language inventors and enthusiasts, getting to know many of them well. One of the book's two appendices lists 500 artificial languages; the other offers translations of the Lord's Prayer into 17 languages and of the Story of Babel into another 11. The text contains samples from many more languages, carefully explained and analyzed. Nonetheless, the book wears its learning very lightly; it is delightfully personal, and as readable as a novel. It is in fact as much about the histories of the inventors and devotees of the languages as about the languages themselves; these histories are mostly strange and often sad.

BOOK REVIEW

By Ernest Davis

Invented languages can be categorized by the purposes of their inventors. There are the logical languages, such as John Wilkins's Analytical Language and James Cooke Brown's Loglan, intended to avoid the muddle and ambiguity of natural language and allow every thought to be presented clearly. There are universalist languages, such as Esperanto and Volapük, designed to overcome the parochialism of existing language communities and allow any two people (or at least speakers of any two European languages) to communicate; immense numbers of these were created in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There are attempts at a "real character": systems of ideograms whose shapes would convey meaning pictorially. Suzette Elgin developed Láadan as a language that would capture the feminine viewpoint and redress the masculine bias built into existing languages. J.R.R. Tolkien worked for years on the Elvish languages Quenya and Sindarin, inventing not just two languages, but a whole history of language development as a purely private project, to satisfy his own aesthetic sense. The Klingon language was invented for the *Star Trek* movies.

Mathematical notation, of course, is international, and its meaning is extremely precise; the subject matter is very limited, however, and the notation does not lend itself to general communication. Attempts to construct a language that would be as expressive as natural language but as precise as mathematics attracted much attention in the 17th and 18th centuries. The best known is Wilkins's Analytical Language, the subject of a well-known essay by Jorge Luis Borges. In Wilkins's language, the form of each word indicates its meaning, according to a hierarchy of categories that he designed. Wilkins's work attracted the interest of Newton, Leibniz, and Locke.

Okrent worked out the word for "shit" in the Analytical Language as follows:

Category XXXI (Motion) Ce	subcategory IV (purgation) p
sub-subcategory 9 (from "gross" parts) uhw	opposite (of vomiting) s

Thus, "cepuhus."

More recently, Brown, a sociologist, revived the idea in the Loglan language. Modeled on mathematical logic, the language is intended to be clear, unambiguous, and free of cultural bias. The problem is that it is entirely unlearnable; no fluent speakers exist. Okrent laboriously attempted to translate the sentence (from Borges's essay on Wilkins) "Obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural" into Loglan:

li'a ro da poi se ciste le munje fi'e zo'e cu cunso qi'e culno so'i smadi,

for which she provides the helpful gloss

li'a {clearly . . .} [₁(₂ cunso (random thing(s)), culnol (full things(s)):] ((₃(₄ ro every (of) da X), <₅ poi which [₆< , se ciste being system structure(s) >₇, (₈ [ciste] system(s):] le the munje universe(s)), (₉ fi'e created by zo'e unspecif it),₁₀>,₁₁),₁₂),₁₃ cu is/does <₁₄ cunso being random >₁₅, gi'e and <₁₆ culno being full >₁₇, (₁₈ [culno2 (filler) :] soi many smadi guess thing(s))₁₉].

She was delighted when she finally managed to get the Loglan sentence past the online parser, confirming that it was grammatical. But to her disappointment, the experts said that her sentence actually means "All classifications of the universe are random and full of people who guess."

As an actual language, Esperanto is the most successful invented language. It was invented in the 1880s by Ludwik Zamenhof to be used as a universal language and thus to lead to world peace. It did not quite accomplish that, but there is a large, international Esperanto community; there are even native speakers. The Esperanto community, as Okrent describes it, has a distinctive, pleasant, open character. In her words,

"If you told me that you just saw a nudist, a gay ornithologist, a railroad enthusiast, and a punk cannabis smoker walking down the street together, I would be waiting for the punch line. But if you then told me that they were speaking Esperanto, no punch line would be necessary. It would all make complete and utter sense."

It is also somewhat cultish, with trademark green stockings. At present, the idea that the multiplicity of languages is one of the major obstacles to world peace seems, at first thought, naive. On second thought, considering the grave difficulties between the Anglophone and the Francophone communities in Canada or the Flemish and the Walloons in Belgium, Esperanto may yet have a historic role to play.

One striking feature of Okrent's account is how often these projects ended in in-fighting, conflict, and heartache. Of course, people will fight over anything, and projects driven by impossibly grandiose expectations are apt to end in disappointment; still, the degree of hostility and bitterness seems disproportionate. Esperanto went through a split, known as the Schism, soon after its first successes. Brown, the inventor of Loglan, fought with speakers of the language over questions of control; he eventually broke with them entirely and brought a legal suit against them, and they renamed their language. Similarly, Johann Schleyer, who invented Volapük, fought fiercely with his followers over the development of the language; the movement shattered into many separate derivative languages.

George Orwell once wrote sarcastically about invented languages:

"I wish now that I had read "Basic English versus the Artificial Languages" before and not after reviewing the interesting little book in which Professor Lancelot Hogben sets forth his own artificial language Interglossa. For in that case I should have realized how comparatively chivalrous Professor Hogben had been toward the inventors of rival international languages. Controversies on serious subjects are often far from polite. Followers of the Stalinist-Trotskyist controversy will have observed that an unfriendly note tends to creep into it, and when the Tablet and the Church Times are having a go at one another, the blows are not always above the belt. But for sheer dirtiness of fighting, the feuds between the inventors of the various international languages would take a lot of beating."

This is amply illustrated in Okrent's book.

Okrent does not discuss it, but the same thing has happened with Tolkien's Elvish languages Quenya and Sindarin, whose very active online community of enthusiasts is divided into two bitterly hostile camps: One views the languages diachronically, studying how Tolkien's formulations developed over his lifetime; the other views them synchronically, working on the formulation of a fixed, usable form. The intensity of the abuse hurled back and forth is reminiscent of the furor scholasticus of warring 16th-century classical scholars, fighting to the death over the correct reading of a verse in the Greek and Latin poets.

One of the greatest successes described by Okrent is also the saddest story. Charles Bliss, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, developed a writing system based on pictographs, called Blissymbolics, which he published in 1949. In the 1970s staff at the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre, looking for a way to enable patients with cerebral palsy to communicate, came across Bliss's book and found his system extraordinarily useful. Children previously able to express themselves only in frustrated kicking quickly learned Bliss's symbols and were able to communicate by pointing to the symbols on a chart. Naturally, the Centre got in touch with Bliss, hoping for advice on how best to use his system; naturally, after years of being entirely ignored, he was delighted. He mortgaged his house to pay for the journey to Toronto, which turned out to be disastrous for all. The Centre's goal was to make the system best serve the needs of the children; Bliss furiously objected to any departure from his pure vision. Insanely controlling, desperately insecure, he alternated between wild enthusiasm—proposing marriage to the Centre's speech therapist a few days after his arrival—and wild abuse combined with legal threats. In the end, the Centre paid him \$160,000 to go away.

The book ends in a happier place, at a Klingon convention. The Klingon language was invented, and is regularly upgraded, by Marc Okrand, a professional linguist, under a contract with Paramount Pictures. It combines unusual elements from a wide range of existing languages, with the deliberate aims of being peculiar but not impossible linguistically, and of sounding harsh and ugly, as befits a warrior species (while remaining pronounceable to actors). The Klingon community, Okrent says, is now larger than the linguistic community of any Native American language except Navajo. Klingon enthusiasts have regular conventions; like large Halloween parties, they give participants the chance to don Klingon costume and practice the language. Well, they're having fun, also one of the innumerable purposes that language serves.

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