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Review: The Science Fictionalization of Linguistic Invention
Reviewed Work(s): From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages by Michael Adams; A Dictionary of Made-Up Languages: From Adûnaic to Elvish, Zaum to Klingon—The Anwa (Real) Origins of Invented Lexicons by Stephen D. Rogers
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BOOKS IN REVIEW

The Science Fictionalization of Linguistic Invention. Michael Adams. *From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. vi + 294 pp. $19.95 hc.

Stephen D. Rogers. *A Dictionary of Made-Up Languages: From Adûnaic to Elvish, Zaum to Klingon—The Anwa (Real) Origins of Invented Lexicons*. Avon, MA: Adamas Media, 2011. ix + 293 pp. $16.95 hc.

The urge to tinker with language is probably inextricable from the capacity to think about language. This restless spirit of linguistic reinvention is most obvious in the verbal play of poets; it also inspires great disciplinary social projects such as the official normalization of national languages and the visionary utopian projects of constructing international languages that will transcend vernacular politics. In seventeenth-century Europe, philosophers experimented with ways of recovering the language of Adam before the fall into Babel. In the next century, the project mutated into a quest for a fully rational transhuman language free of irrationality and irregularity. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it had mutated yet again into the visionary International Auxiliary Languages (IALs) such as Volapük, Interlingua, and Esperanto, whose goal was to create global peace by facilitating communication across linguistic boundaries. It is hard to tell whether our age has become less interested in language invention. While there are said to be over a million speakers of Esperanto today, the unquestioned dominance of English in the post-World War II era appears to have stifled some of the romance of IALs. The success of structural linguistics and cybernetics in detaching language from personal agency has reinforced the notion that languages are essentially games, not conveyors of meaning. The folks who in the past might have labored to construct a universal language are more likely now to be constructing alien dialects to make fantastic fiction and computer games more immersive. The emphasis in language invention seems to have shifted from projects of consolidating actual human communication to dispersing it—or, rather, to representing its dispersal, either in alien tongues or future evolutionary mutations. These two dispersal zones—the alien and the future—are of course the zones of sf. More and more examples of contemporary language invention appear as what the constructed-language (or conlang) community calls "artlangs"—games, aesthetic devices, or artful exhibits for coteries of fans; and these artlangs seem increasingly rotated through the metatext of sf. This emphasis on aesthetic play, historical volatility, and the artistic fascination with cultural difference reflects the rapid extinction of languages and the domination of one imperial tongue, English, in the postmodern era. As real cultures go extinct, they are supplemented, effaced, and mourned by imaginary ones. This, too, is in the zone of sf.

The title of Michael Adams's *From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages* points in that direction. Three of the first four essays are sf-curious. Arden R. Smith's "Confounding Babel: International Auxiliary Languages" gives a clear, useful history of IALs, from the early experiments in "a priori

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languages" such as John Wilkins's "philosophical language" to modern, simplified, natural languages. Howard Jackson's "Invented Vocabularies: The Cases of Newspeak and Nadsat" and E.S.C. Weiner and Jeremy Marshall's "Tolkien's Invented Languages" are both excellent introductions to the classical sf/fantasy artlangs. "Wild and Whirling Words: The Invention and Use of Klingon," co-written by Mark Okrand, the originator of the *Star Trek* tongue, and Adams, Judith Hendriks-Hermans, and Sjaak Kroon provide an authoritative history of the franchise-evolution of Klingon and explanations for its pseudo-structure and phonology ("be alien-sounding" [117].) Regrettably, there is no discussion of the cultural baseline that determines what does or does not sound alien.

Things get interesting with "Gaming Languages and Language Games" by James Portnow, a game designer with a background in Classics. (The volume includes no contributors' bios—an irritating lack in a scholarly book, which may be a tactic to conceal that not all the authors are practicing academics. Not all of them are easily googleable.) Portnow observes that artificial languages in fantasy-based games are important tools to "help players accept the strange and the foreign, to willingly suspend their disbelief" (136-37)—i.e., to create fantastic plausibility. While some game-languages such as *Myst*'s D'Ni and *Final Fantasy 10*'s Al-Bhed are systematic and fully integrated in the game-play, most are *flavor languages*, incomplete tongues "often comprised only of a few sentences that operate unsystematically, that is, without following strict rules" (140). Portnow provides a useful list of principles that guide language design for computer games: the language "should be rewarding for the novice" (i.e., not too difficult to learn), "learnable in the context of the game," and "inessential to game play" (i.e., a player uninterested in the language should be able to just get on with play); it should fit "into the creative property," part of the commodity-universe of the game-brand; and players should be able to learn it "at unknown intervals"—i.e., it should not become an externally imposed discipline. Although Portnow does not extrapolate beyond the professional requirements of game design, his essay illuminates how the interest in artificial languages is increasingly defined by sf and computer gaming—in both cases by the aesthetic representation of transformed communication, rather than by attempts to intervene in, or to actually transform, interpersonal communications.

"Oirish Invention: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Paul Muldoon" by noted Joyce scholar Stephen Watt is another succinct and intelligent introduction into a well-researched subject: the creative enhancement/deformation of imperial English by modern Irish writers. The innovative aspect of Watt's essay is not in its content, but in its placement. In the context of *From Elvish to Klingon*, Watt's argument that Joyce's, Beckett's, and Muldoon's stylistic experiments are responses to "the inadequacy of English to the modern Irish writer's project" (162) becomes less a matter of cultural politics and more of discursive adequacy—i.e., the conflict of language games.

The overarching thesis implicit in the anthology can be detected in the placement of the essays. Moving from the great historical projects of linguistic

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invention in IALs through fictional and ludic experiments that also become proprietary commodities, the book concludes with Suzanne Romaine's "Revitalized Languages as Invented Languages," a dazzling tour de force that demonstrates that attempts to revitalize languages such as Hebrew, Hawaiian, and Cornish are games of linguistic invention, however bloody serious their politics are. Romaine describes, through dozens of linguistic revival and renovation projects (in addition to the languages listed above, she refers to Neo-Breton, Quechua, Mâori, Galician, Welsh, and Irish), the ironies inherent in trying to anchor national or ethnic identity in contested natlangs that are actually artlangs. It is one step from this to see modern "natural" languages as disciplinary games continually enforced, reinvented, and renormalized by their players.

Another dimension of this science-fictionalization of linguistic invention shows up in Stephen D. Rogers's *A Dictionary of Made-Up Languages*. Purporting to be a dictionary, this peculiar book is more a hybrid between a handbook and a big list of 125 invented languages. The languages are apparently chosen at random from among IALs, fictional tongues from works of fantasy and sf, idiosyncratic DIY constructions, and computer games. Each entry is organized under a set of subheadings: "Spoken by" (the actual or fictional users); "Documented by" (the originator or author); "Behind the words" (the actual or fictional context of its invention); "Derivation of the language" (a rarely used category identifying the historical origins); "Characterization of the language" (grammatical features); "A Taste of the Language" (a list of vocabulary words); "Some Useful Phrases" (without reference to whom they might be useful and why); "Philological Facts" (factoids, actually); and "For More Info" (references primarily to Internet sites devoted to the languages or texts in question). A carefully designed handbook with these rubrics might be useful and entertaining; even if it did not shed light on the history of language invention, it might help to map out the territory shared by earnest projectors and world-imaginers.

A Dictionary of Made-Up Languages does not do this. The book does not target a demanding audience (its publisher, Adams Media, lists *The Part-Time Vegan* [2011] and *Why Men Love Bitches* [2002] among its featured titles). The included languages are arbitrarily selected to represent different kinds of "made-up" languages. Classical IALs are well-represented (Esperanto, Volapük, Interlingua, Loglan, Solresol—though not Wilkins's Philosophical Language). There are just as many fly-by-night contemporary experiments in personal eccentricity, seemingly lifted directly from some Internet conlang site (of which there are many): Brithenig, Spocanian, Talossan, Teonaht, Toki Pona, Verdurian, Wenedyk. The vast majority of Roberts's examples are from sf and fantasy literature, films, and television shows, selected without any evident method. Several of Tolkien's, Le Guin's, Poul Anderson's, and C.J. Cherryh's tongues make appearances, but these too are random selections: Kargish is there, but not Karhidish; Pravic, but not Athshean. Newspeak, Nadsat, Láadan, and Babel-17 are represented, but not Riddley Walker's future Kentish, Xemoahoa-B from Ian Watson's *The Embedding*, the Vril-ya tongue

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from Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*, or any of Poe's or Haggard's mysterious languages. Roberts includes Amtorian, the Venusian language from Edgar Rice Burroughs's Carson Napier novels (1934-64), but leaves out Barsoomian and, stunningly, Tarzan's Mangali, the apes' master tongue and origin of all human languages. There are entries for Klingon and N'avi, but the majority of pop-sf examples are flavor languages used only for décor in films and tv shows such as *Stargate* (1994), *Land of the Lost* (1991), *Alien Nation* (1988), *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), *The Adventures of Tintin* (2001), *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Earth: Final Conflict* (1997-2002), *Babylon 5* (1994-98), and *Quest for Fire* (1981). Not even the desire to appeal to Lumpenkultur explains such bizarre inclusions as several examples from the Carreña series, books self-published by one Gerard K. Martin and reviewed nowhere; or Molvanian from the Rough Guide-parody *Molvanîa: A Land Untouched by Modern Dentistry* (2003); or the sublimely loopy Enchanta from a 2005 Filipino television serial.

Even if one could look past this hodge-podge, the ostensible sober apparatus of subheadings falls to pieces instantly. What might work for carefully designed systems like IALs or Tolkien's myth-languages shuts down entirely when dealing with flavor languages. There are no philological data or historical contexts for jumbles of sounds intended only to evoke oddity and alienness. The "philological facts" about Dothraki, the language of the nomad warriors constructed for the television adaptation of *Game of Thrones* (2011-), include a paragraph on the Language Creation Society and one on George R.R. Martin (who, incidentally, did not invent the language); philological facts about Poul Anderson's Anglic include the fact that the author's daughter is married to Greg Bear. The "Documented by" entry on the DIY conlang Teonaht reads: "Sally Cave started developing Teonaht in 1962 when she was nine years old. The idea of constructing a language had come to her when she was given a kitten four years previously and she invented a winged feline race called the Feleonim" (224). I do not kid.

A Dictionary of Made-Up Languages is basically a "flavor book," designed to entertain folks who do not care a fig about method or design. In more serious hands, a book like this could be an important reference work—or even an engaging Borgesian chaography of Babel. Roberts's book does even so have a guiding sensibility: it takes for granted a contemporary worldview that *From Elvish to Klingon* develops through careful accretion—namely, that all language is a social construction, and the more consciously it is pursued, the more it resembles sf.—**Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.,** ***SFS***

Seeing to Ballard. Jeanette Baxter and Rowland Wymer, eds. *J.G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. x + 255 pp. $85 hc.

How do you talk about a writer as prolific as J.G. Ballard, a writer whose proudest accomplishment was to be declared "beyond psychiatric help" by a publisher's reader of *Crash* (1973), who relished the sublime contradictions and violent intervals of modern life, who wanted "to Fuck Ronald Reagan"?

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