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*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*

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

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While it is not a scholarly work, Arika Okrent's *In the Land of Invented Languages* recommends itself to linguistic anthropologists on a variety of counts. An intellectual picaresque describing the author's historical and ethnographic forays into the imaginative worlds of language inventors and their followers, it offers engaging examination of shifting motivations behind the production and promotion of constructed languages (conlangs). It could be used alongside similarly accessible trade books in teaching introductory language and culture type courses. In this context, Okrent, who has graduate training in psycholinguistics, presents an argument that largely complements the linguistic anthropological perspective. Students primed with key concepts will be able to draw pertinent theoretical connections.

From enlightenment rationalism to the political utopianism of the age of nationalism (which gave us international auxiliary languages such as Esperanto) and the playful mythopoesis of modern fantasy genres, Okrent asserts that "trends, or eras, in language invention . . . reflect the preoccupations of the surrounding culture" such that "the history of invented languages is a story about the way we think about language" (p. 17). Many of her language inventors seek to perfect what they see as imperfections of natural languages such as imprecision, ambiguity, and mutual unintelligibility. While Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Blackwell, 1997) focuses on projects addressed to similar concerns, his genealogy begins with the efforts of medieval and Renaissance savants to find a magical resolution to the problem of Babel: the postlapsarian confusion of tongues. By contrast, Okrent begins in a decidedly modern, scientific, moment, with the work of John Wilkins, a seventeenth century English empiricist and member of the Royal Society, who endeavored to produce a "philosophical language" in which all verbal signifiers would have a logically-motivated rather than arbitrary connection to the things they signify. Okrent takes a characteristically irreverent approach to describing how this language is supposed to work, devoting a full two chapters to her search through the tables of Wilkins's gargantuan, 600 page treatise for the word for "shit." The phonemes of which that word, "*cepuhws*," are comprised indicate that it designates "a serous and watery purgative motion from the consistent and gross parts" (p. 57), as do the graphemes comprising its written character.

The effort Okrent exerts in finding this word demonstrates how impractical such a language would be for naturalistic communication. "When you speak in concepts," she writes, "it's too damn hard to say anything" (p. 72). Yet, she continues, "people find something very comforting about the notion that *words* are the problem, not concepts. When words fail us, we tend to blame the words . . . When we struggle with language, we have the sensation that our clean, beautiful ideas remain trapped in our heads. We accuse language of being too crude and clumsy to adequately express our thoughts." Linguistic anthropologists will immediately note that faulting language for insufficient transparency in the transmission of ideational intentions also reflects what Michael Silverstein identifies as the "semantico-referential" skewing of Western linguistic theories, and the prevalence of what Michael Reddy terms the "conduit metaphor" in Western language ideologies.

These views crop up again later in Okrent's account of Loglan, a language invented in the twentieth century by American sociologist James Cook Brown in order to test the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. To do this, Brown sought to invent a language based on the principles of formal logic and measure whether its speakers would become more logical. Improbably, devotees of this project, and its more successful offshoot Lojban, continue working to craft a language that can serve as a "valid test of the Whorfian hypothesis" because it is "culturally neutral" (p. 239). "In terms of vocabulary, this means that definitions should be unclouded by connotations and metaphorical extensions that may not be shared from culture to culture. In terms of grammar, this means that it should have the resources to express the range of distinctions that languages express, including distinctions that English may not have." For those toiling away to construct it, such a language not only holds the promise of testing, but also of overcoming Whorfian effects. Attending a meeting of Lojban devotees, Okrent reports that the little live conversation she saw was "like watching people do long division in their heads. Of course, the types of

people who are attracted to Lojban are precisely the types who are good at doing long division in their heads" (p. 238).

Okrent concludes that invented languages can only promulgate themselves by constituting constituencies of speakers, i.e., speech communities in which language interfaces with social and cultural life. The inherently cultural nature of natural language, she argues, dooms philosophical languages to fail: "The best hope a language inventor has for the survival of his or her project is to find a group of people who will use it, and then hand it over and let them ruin its perfection" (p. 262). She illustrates this point with the language that bookends her project: Klingon, the fictional tongue of a martial race of Star Trek aliens with corrugated foreheads, whose real human speakers have no particular interest in improving natural language. The book builds towards the author's test for level-one certification at the annual Klingon Language Institute. Along the way, she discovers that Klingon flourishes because its adepts approach it as a form of language play, and associate its use with the playful enactment of Klingon culture. (The documentary *Earthlings: Ugly Bags of Mostly Water* [Alexandre O. Philippe, dir., SONEW Productions, 2004] beautifully illustrates the relationship between linguistic and communicative competence in the Klingon speech community.)

As passages cited here indicate, Okrent's tone is consistently wry. This could throw some readers off. Although she may poke fun at language inventors' delusions of grandeur or conlang enthusiasts' peculiar fixations, Okrent's narrative is held together by something she shares with them all: what she calls "my own heart-fluttering fascination with languages" (p. 288). *In the Land of Invented Languages* is a cabinet of curiosity rather than a decorous museum. Insofar as it does provoke curiosity about language as a locus of invention, imagination, and play, it is a book worth reading.

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The Linguistic Legacy of Spanish and Portuguese. Colonial Expansion and Language Change. Clancy Clements. Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xix + 256 pp.

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Clancy Clements has contributed an outstanding work on the emergence of Spanish and Portuguese based pidgin/creole language varieties. With some very striking examples of colonial language contact, he gives an illustrative overview of the evolution and nature of several non-standard varieties, namely Bozal Spanish, Chinese Coolie Spanish in Cuba, Chinese Immigrant Spanish, Andean Spanish, and Barranquenho. The analyses apply a "usage-based model of grammar based on Emergent Grammar and the evolutionary model of language change" (p. 210) in natural adult-to-adult communication. Clements' special approach consists of the systematic linking of detailed linguistic analyses of contact variety features with ecolinguistic parameters including history, politics, demographics, and prestige.

Clements highlights the important role of language ecology in language formation and maintenance, claiming that varieties are "shaped by demographics, by prestige, as well as by linguistic input, general cognitive abilities and limitations, and by the dynamics of the speech community" (p. 217). The volume thus meets the growing interest in the linguistic ecology paradigm describing the complex relationship between languages, speakers, and social practice (see the introduction of *Linguistic ecology and language contact* Ralph Ludwig, Peter Mühlhauser & Steve Pagel, eds., to appear, for a detailed discussion of the concept). Although not quoted, Clements' approach resembles Einar Haugen's work (*The Ecology of Language*, Stanford University Press, 1972) on the impact of sociolinguistic (here called "ecolinguistic") issues such as social background of the speakers or prestige. However, he follows William Mackey ("The Ecology of language shift" in *Sprachkontakt und Sprachkonflikt*, Peter Nelde, ed., Steiner 2001:35-41) in adding what are framed as "external ecologic" (or sociohistorical) issues such as history, attitude, domains of use, and the nature of the speakers. Much like Ludwig/Mühlhauser/Pagel, he views the sociolinguistic and non-sociolinguistic factors to be part of ecolinguistics,