GeekSpeak | Jost Zetzsche

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Dedideheril Versus Dedideherilid

Every so often I will meet a reader at a conference who refers to me as "geeky." In today's techno-world, I know that this is not an insult (and as the author of the GeekSpeak column, I surely have only myself to blame). In my own defense, however, I must protest. I am not really into science fiction so loved by geeks—aside from a very intense early-adolescent Jules Verne episode—but I have long been intrigued by the fascination that some of the science fiction classics from the 1960s and 1970s hold for a good number of the folks who determine our Internet experience today.

Take Google, for instance. The Googleplex, Google's headquarters, is named after a character in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* What was the first building on the Googleplex that Google used? Building *42*. Now, if you are an über-geek, or even reasonably well-read, you will naturally know that, according to the *Hitchhiker's Guide,* "the answer to life, the universe and everything" is *42*. Bizarrely, you can also find this same ultimate answer by typing *the answer to life the universe and everything* into the search engines Google, Bing, or—I kid you not—the very serious WolframAlpha computational knowledge engine.

I find this fascination (or obsession) interesting because of translation, of course. Do you remember the Universal Translator from *Star Trek*? Mega-hyperpolyglot C-3PO of *Star Wars* fame who spoke six million languages? And the babel fish from the *Hitchhiker's Guide*? In each of these sci-fi worlds, automatic translation was solved. For good.

If you take a look at the other predictions from these retro classics—space and time travel, de- and rematerialization ("Beam me up, Scotty"), and interaction with alien life forms—it is clear that the translation component has come a lot closer to fulfillment than any of the other futuristic technologies, regardless of how inadequate most machine translation still is.

Not a very pleasant thought? How about this geeky alternative? There has been a flurry of articles on artificial languages lately (you know: Esperanto, Klingon, Elvish, etc.), and I had a ball doodling around with a very feminine language called Láadan. I had to wait until our youngest had gone to bed to read some of the words and their meanings to the rest of my family a couple of weeks ago, but we certainly had a fun time with it (check out a translation for this column's heading at laadanlanguage.org).

But here is what I have been wondering about in the context of artificial languages. Read the recent *Huffington Post* article on the resurrection of Wampanoag (http://huff.to/tHuvmR), or rent the beautiful documentary *We Still Live Here* (see makepeaceproductions.com/wampfilm.html), and then consider this humble proposition: Why don't we invest all that linguistic and sci-fi energy evidenced above into restoring dead languages rather than coming up with new ones? Just asking.

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