

Número 13: El Esperanto

Arika Okrent's Interview

Por Guillermo San Emeterio // 6 de junio de 2012

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In order to try and understand better the keys behind language invention, the american linguist [Arika Okrent \(@arikaokrent\)](#) gives us her vision on artificial languages, after the research that took her to publish in 2009 the book '[In the Land of Invented Languages](#)'.

Question: In a world with 5.000 languages, most of them dying, is there room for invented languages? Does their existence make sense?

Of course there is room for invented languages. The existence of one language doesn't take anything away from the existence of another – especially with invented languages, which have basically no chance of gaining the kind of political or cultural power necessary to “kill” any other language. The common complaint is “why waste your time learning klingon or Esperanto when you could be learning Welsh or Cherokee?” That is like saying “why waste your time growing roses when you could be growing wheat to feed the hungry?” It's a hobby. There is room for it, and whether or not it does any good, it certainly doesn't do any harm.

Q: Most invented languages were born with the idea of simplifying communication and uniting people. Has any of them achieved so?

Not on a worldwide scale. A few have succeeded in developing a community of speakers who might not have otherwise come together. I would say this idea of simplyfying and uniting language had a fashion in the 19th and early 20th century, but these days the goals are more modest. To engage in creative play, to conduct interesting thought experiments in what a language can be, to relate to other people who share your interests.

Q: Two of the most popular (Elvish and Kinglon) are fitted for small and closed communities. How do you explain that contradiction?

It's not really a contradiction. They are artistic projects rather than social engineering projects. They succeed because they fit the fictional world well, and they are popular because the fictional world is popular.

Q: Do you think that behind every language inventor is there a sort of God Complex?

Not every one of them. Through the history of invented languages, many inventors have thought they were the first one to think of such an idea. Many have thought it would change the world (and perhaps make them rich and famous). Many have tried to keep complete control of their language and not let anyone else change it. But for some of them, they just had a simple curiosity – could this be done?- and they set out to satisfy it.

Q: Have you run into any invented language that made you think “this one should have work. This one could have been a proper international language”?

No. The particular characteristics of any language are almost completely unimportant. What is important is whether people will want to use it, and the reasons people use languages have to do with personal tastes, social momentum, and accidents of history. If someone had asked me in 1900 whether the Hebrew language could be revitalized

into a modern language used by millions of people, I would have said probably not. But it did happen – for a variety of reasons having very little do with the features of Hebrew itself.

Q: Was there any “what the hell is this”?

All the time!

Adam-Man tongue:

<http://inthelandofinventedlanguages.com/index.php?page=languages&id=142>

Ruggles Universal Language:

<http://inthelandofinventedlanguages.com/index.php?page=languages&id=39>

American Language:

<http://inthelandofinventedlanguages.com/index.php?page=languages&id=89>

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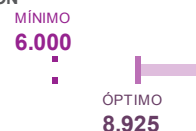


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All the time! [Adam-Man Tongue](#), [Ruggles Universal Language](#), [American Language](#), [Babm](#) and many others.

Q: What about Esperanto? Is its current situation the best it can get?

In the context of the history of language invention, Esperanto is the biggest success of all time. It has thousands of speakers, even some native speakers, and a worldwide community. I think it's staying pretty stable. Not growing, but not shrinking either. There will always be people who just like that sort of thing. It's not out to take over the world, but the longer Esperanto sticks around the better chance those people have of finding their way to it.

Q: Is the Internet helping the extension of invented languages or is it reassuring English supremacy?

The Internet makes it easier for people with unusual interests to find each other and form communities, so in that way it is good for invented languages.

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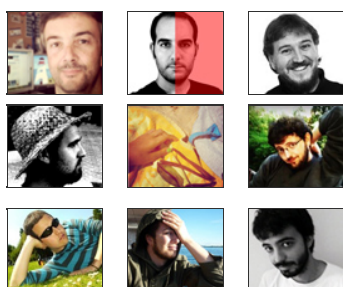
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