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You don't know what you're saying

A language story (in Klingon)

By Sam Rolens

It's a familiar story, maybe the most well known in English literature. It's about capitalism and happiness and it starts like this: "Marley was dead, to begin with. There could be no doubt. *His death howl had been sung.*" And if that doesn't give it away, you'd know it by man on the shallow stage of this Chicago playhouse in a heartbeat. There he is, sitting sour in his counting house; his little desk piled with gold, his nephew effervescent and obnoxious; his hapless clerk idly sharpening a dagger in the corner. You guessed it, it's Scrooge: miser, jerk, failed warrior, Klingon.

I'll admit, I'm having a hard time as the lights come up on *A Klingon Christmas Carol*. The problem is, these are *my* people. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* came out when I was three years old and it has never not mattered to me. But a life of loving Star Trek teaches you skepticism to navigate a world of fan films, pulp novels and bad tattoos. And in these bumpy heads and billowing wigs, all I see is me: the 11-year-old under a rubber Halloween mask that came in a kit with a wig and brown pigment *this* close to blackface. The dark side of too much fandom.

This is barking, hacking, snarled Dickens shouted from warriors' lungs. "nuqneH," spits Scrooge at his nephew, which sounds like *nook-nekk*, the final consonant a crunchy rip like radio static. It means "what do you want?"—the closest thing to a greeting in Klingon: the language of Star Trek's chunky-headed, honor-centric space Falstaffs. Because this troupe is doing Dickens not just as Klingons, but *in* Klingon. It's a language I've always known about, and always assumed was little else than the language of the Star Trek super-nerd.

But it's the biggest fully usable and regularly used useless language ever. *Useless* in that, unlike Esperanto, which sports the charismatic goal of global unity, Klingon was invented as set dressing, for fun. *Useless* in that, just like natural languages, it has no purpose other than communicating information from one person to another. And really, it's pretty amazing that we're so bored by the concept of language that we can think of something that protects thought and meaning to survive the vacuum between people as *useless*.

It's too bad too because, as linguists and polyglots love to point out, it's probably the most important and fundamental way we interact with our universe. But for most of us, it's hard to notice how our language works while we're using it. It's an important and popular fact, after all, that you're almost never saying quite what you mean. Your words are approximations, close-enoughs that cobble together the right idea in the mind of your listener. I start to realize I'm not very comfortable knowing as little as I do about my own relationship to language while Klingon can go from creation to Christmas Carol in my lifetime.

But while this thought makes me cringe the first time Scrooge says *BaQa'* (humbug), I'm won over by curtain call. I'm wrong about *Klingon Christmas Carol*. It's lively, short, manages to make a lot of jokes without being one, and plays nightly to a sold-out crowd of mostly non-Trekkies. It's fun, pithy, moving; in sort, all the things A Christmas Carol is. In Klingon, without relying on that to make up for a half-baked everything else.

It was my first step in a long road of being wrong about Klingon. Soon I'd find that the typical Klingon speaker isn't much of a Star Trek fan. That most of them are spouses or sweethearts of non-Klingon-speakers. And that what binds them together more than anything else is a way of looking at language, and therefore the world, to which Klingon uniquely caters. Sure Klingons are a popular Trek icon, cosplayers regularly turn up at conventions in full Klingon garb and StarTrek.com is currently marketing a beer called "Klingon Warnog" to fans. But those aren't the people typically speaking Klingon.

Coming down from Klingon Christmas, I begin to looking deeper into the language. I find out the party's getting bigger all the time. While there are fewer than 100 "fluent" speakers (a relative term for a language with such a limited vocabulary) there are thousands of speakers around the world in between fluency and dabbling-cy. I start realizing too that Klingon has had a far more interesting life within our culture than I ever expected. From the Lutheran minister who thought the greatest challenge for the Bible was a translation into Klingon, to the man who raised his son to speak the language. From the formerly dead Native American tongue embedded in Klingon grammar to the Klingon opera that sold out shows and delighted hundreds (of fans and non-fans alike) throughout Europe. It's been in the job description of interpreters hired at psych-wards who have to cater to aphasia patients that turn up stuck in a language that isn't their first. Most recently, it's been in iPhone commercials, as an option in Bing translate, in a viral parody of Coke's multi-lingual Super Bowl ad, and in the resignation of a North Carolina politician.

Which brings me back to my own relationship with language, or rather the uncomfortable feeling that I don't have one. Mostly, I only notice language at those times when words fail me. When my wife and I leave a movie feeling we know something about how we're feeling and finding ourselves at a loss for words. "You know?" we'll ask each other relentlessly mid sentence, desperate for the other to guess what we mean so we won't have to find a decent way of saying it. These are the rare times we are conscious of speaking, when we pause to take notice of the shape and substance of our ideas before heading back into the sentence. When we and our words lose each other in the frantic mess of trying to get it right.

I wanted to learn more about this thing that is at once a road map of the history of our peoples, an outline for our view of the world, and a window into our brain blueprints and thinking patterns. And one thing Klingon does for its fluent speakers is to make things like this (at least a little bit) clearer. If natural language is as complex, composite and shifting as the Sahara desert, then a constructed language as limited as Klingon is something of a sandbox: a place for speakers to play, and to learn more about the nature of their words, therefore their universe.

The birth of Klingon & the evolution of language

The sticky-looking vapor beading on sweaty, polystyrene Klingon brow ridges makes the set look unbearable. You can all but see the stink in the red uplight of the Klingon bridge in *Star Trek III*, the movie that introduced the world to Klingon for the first time in the summer of 1984. Stewing in furred uniforms, a ring of actors glare under high-hairline wigs and chunky foreheads at lights shining from console props up into their faces. Above them, on a captain's chair high enough to be a throne, perches Kruge, the Klingon Commander, *Back to the Future's* Doc Brown, Christopher Lloyd. Around them are the set crew, puffing steam and dry ice over the roasting actors, keeping them not too moist, but moist enough. The makeup team is there too, ready to re-darken eye sockets. Right there with them is a linguist: the man who built the body, the grammar, the bark of Klingon. Mark Okrand: Square One of my Klingon adventure.

But before I jumped into the creation of Klingon, I wanted to learn a little more about real—sorry—*natural* languages and how they were created. And the first thing that hit me is: there are *lots* of languages. *Really* lots. It astounds me just thinking about *how* lots there are. In fact, there have been even more than there are. Many have died, many we never found before they died or evolved into something else. Languages will also collide into each other, became new together, and then of course there are some we never wrote down in the first place. So when I get a chance to talk to Benjamin Bergen, a cognitive science professor from UC San Diego who knows a lot about languages, I ask him flat out: Why are there so many?

“Well, why are there so many kinds of birds?”

We both wait a minute while the gears move in my head. Language, Bergen tells me, followed rivers. It crossed over mountain peaks. Moved through valleys. It started somewhere (or a few somewheres) and then splintered as folks moved away. As their ways grew apart, so did their accents, their words. Languages change as we speak, dividing like cells, evolving and looking new when we finally meet them again. But that's not what happens in 1984, when a new language emerges in a new kind of way; one that, while artificial, provides a lay-talker like me a kind of acted-out guide to the natural evolution of language.

“yIHoh,” Lloyd growls on set. *Kill one of them*. Each of those capitol H's is a phlegmy, choking consonant like the one that opens that Yiddish word *chutzpah*. Lloyd looks glazed into the distance for a moment, bored. “jISaHbe'.” *I don't care which*.

“Damn it!” Now Lloyd gives his thrown a whack and his eyes find Marc Okrand—a quick-to-grin linguistics PhD with curly dark hair and circle spectacles. “I messed up the Klingon,” Lloyd says to its creator. But who cares? At this point, the

“language” is a not-yet-complete grammar and a handful of words. And Lloyd is the most experienced speaker in the galaxy. The fact is that Okrand, the production team, and even Lloyd are committed to doing something new for Star Trek III. This language, while made-up, is real—more real than Lloyd’s plastic knife, his fiberglass bridge or the light-effects of his torpedoes.

People—mostly scholars and philosophers—have been making up languages since at least the 12th Century. But nearly all before Klingon have been created in the service of some higher-minded purpose. Some, like *Esperanto*, to bring the world together; some, like a *whistled language* from the mountains of Mexico, to communicate over vast distances yelling can’t cross; some, like the curious *Boontling* language of the Anderson Valley in California, to revel in some serious us-and-them with baffled neighbors. But few before Klingon (though more and more since), as a piece of pop-art; for play. And none have ever managed to be as culturally pervasive.

And really, it *would* be Star Trek to first commission something like this just for the fun of it. “The whole approach in Star Trek to science,” explains Okrand, “has been to make things as real as possible, based on the information available to us.” It starts with what we know, he says, then imagines just a little further ahead. “You go beyond, you extrapolate.” Talking with Okrand, it’s easy to see what excited him about the Klingon project, and why he went all-in; why he didn’t just settle for word-replacement. He built Klingon to be as inhuman as possible, evading his understanding of linguistic “universals” and changing the rules of Klingon every time the structure started looking too Russian, too Finnish, too anything familiar. For an academic like Okrand, designing an alien’s language allowed him to play with all he knows about ours, combining his knowledge with a sense of exploration.

“For me, it’s a form of artistic expression,” says language creator John Quijada. He’s famous in the conlang (constructed language) community for Ithkuil, a lingo designed to be the most precise possible means of expression. But Quijada says most people miss the point. He didn’t create Ithkuil to be learned or spoken. “You can dab pigments on a canvas, or play a musical instrument, or write poetry,” he says as though reading down a list. “People make art out of anything that’s part of the human experience. Why not one of the most fundamental elements of the human experience—language—the one we can’t do without?”

Klingon affords Okrand the opportunity to play painter in a world of photographers. And surrealist at that. Klingon’s Object-Verb-Subject word order sure looks bizarre next to our Subject-Verb-Object (a structure you can see in any sentence, like: “I-love-you”). In her book *In the Land of Invented Languages*, Arika Okrent (no relation to Okrand) chooses the Klingon proverb, “If it is in your way, knock it down” to demonstrate just how strange the OVS order is to us. *Dubotchugh ylpummoH*, the Klingons would say. Literally: it-you block if (imperative) fall cause.

Back on our stuffy set in 1984, Lloyd calls for a re-shoot. A flubbed line is flubbed, whatever language it’s in. But Okrand asks for time, excited. By blowing the line, Lloyd is providing an opportunity for Okrand to give the Klingon language a

deeper level of reality, and for me to look a little deeper into the evolution of language.

Okrand and Star Trek found each other a few years earlier, when the linguist had lunch in the right cafeteria in the right part of the early '80s. He was working at the National Closed Captioning Institute when a friend introduced him to a passing producer with a unique problem. They wanted an alien language (Vulcan this time, Mr. Spock's language) for a scene in *Star Trek II*. But no one had invented a Vulcan language and the scene had already been shot. So what they needed was a linguist who could invent alien words that would match the mouth movements of the actors so they could just dub-in the Vulcan. Okrand could. He did, and by doing so became Star Trek's first choice for Klingon when they decided they wanted it to be a *language* language.

And no sooner was Klingon carefully built from scratch that Lloyd misused it on camera, to Okrand's delight. The line was: "wa' yIHoh. vay' jISaHbe'." *Kill one of them. Anyone, I don't care which.* What Lloyd said was: "yIHoh. jISaHbe'," dropping the words for "one" and "anyone." Fine, thought Okrand. Better than fine, ideal. Lloyd had done with Klingon what we've done with all our languages since we first started speaking them: messed it up.

"What languages do," says David Peterson, another linguistics pro and creator of Dothraki on HBO's *Game of Thrones*, "is change over a long period of time in the mouths of billions and billions of speakers." It turns out we can see this in English, which is fuller of fossils than any natural history museum. In a 2013 TED talk, Peterson brings up some 15th century English. "And thereupon Isod fell down in a swoon and so lay a great while," wrote Thomas Malory in *Le Mort d'Arthur*. "And when she *might* speak, she said..." In his talk, Peterson stops. "No spoilers," he tells the audience. "You'll just have to read it."

His point is that "might" clearly doesn't mean what it used to. We hear it as something like "to possibly be inclined to." But roughly 500 years ago, it meant "to be able to." Peterson explains that Indo-Europeans used this word *magh* (to have power), which eventually became the Germanic *maganan* (to be able to), which at some point became the English *may* (to be allowed to). Of course, none of us know this when we say "might." But it's there, endless history of use from long-gone speakers still ringing; we let the meaning of our words drift by using them approximately, by nudging them over time to mean something slightly different.

My favorite example of this is that even our word for "literal" started out as a metaphor. Literal comes from *littera*, the Latin word for "letter." As in, written as opposed to spoken. "What we probably meant in the distant past when we asserted something was 'literally true'," writes translation scholar David Bellos, "we did it to emphasize that it was *really* true, true to a higher degree than just being true; that it was among those rare things that were worth of being 'put into letters,' of being written down." Now we use the word to signal that we're *not* being metaphorical, or—even stranger—we're using the word more and more to mean its opposite: *figurative*. Either way, it was a blow to the head for me to realize that literally

literally doesn't quite mean what we think it does. Well it does now, but only because its meaning—like nearly every word we know—has drifted.

“Think about when people say ‘I could care less’ rather than ‘I couldn’t care less,’” says linguist Arica Okrent. She’s had her her eye on this phrase for a while. She’s not sure why it feels so right for so many people, but it has the look of a mistake that could end up replacing the “correct” phrase. But like most linguists, she could care less about the sanctity of English. “Let it all burn down,” she says. “I just want to know how it works.”

Okrand decides to work some habit changes, some history into Klingon, with days of Lloyd speaking Klingon standing in for eons of Klingons speaking Klingon. Klingons don't always bother using the word “one” if they’ve used the pronoun *yl*. While the pronoun means “them”, Okrand figured Klingons nowadays (in the 23rd century) only use it to refer to a single person within a group, so at some point they had stopped bothering to say “one” in a sentence like this.

Unprecedented overkill, maybe. But, since Okrand first built Klingon, his approach has become the standard in movies and TV. Sure, before Klingon J.R.R. Tolkien had built Elvish languages for *The Lord of the Rings*, but most of his work was not included in the books, and the languages weren't grammatically ready to be spoken. And other films, like *A Clockwork Orange*, had dabbled in nonsense languages, but no one had built one from the ground up with Okrand's thoroughness just for scenery. But in the years since Klingon, everything from *Avatar's* Na'vi to *Game of Thrones' Dothraki* proves that producers can't get away with not making their phony tongues real.

“Not everyone can be like Borat,” says linguist-turned-writer Jane Espenson, “And just use Hebrew.” For one thing, in the time since *Star Trek III* the attentiveness of fans seems to have increased tenfold. Espenson says a good example of this is the card game she wrote into an episode of the TV show *Firefly*. “In my episode, we had them playing a card game called *Tall Card*.” But it was never a game, she says. Just actors holding fake cards calling fake bridge-like moves. But shortly after the episode aired, Espenson found a number of websites that organized Tall Card games among fans, with rules extrapolated from the few seconds of play on screen. Fans today are more likely than ever to reach in through the fourth wall, but Klingon made it easy for them.

After *Star Trek III* was a box office hit, publishing a Klingon dictionary just made sense. The hardest part of writing it was done during production, and the franchise at the time has never been more popular. Okrand and Paramount expected the same thing: the book will sell in modest numbers, be good for a laugh among fans, and will then sit as a novelty on shelves across the country. And that, for the moment, was all it did.

A little while after the book came out, Okrand got nervous at a Native American languages conference in Santa Cruz, California. It was his first time back among linguists since publishing the Klingon Dictionary and he didn't know how they would react. He wasn't sure anyone will know about it in the first place. But if

they did, constructed languages are held in pretty low regard by this crowd. To create a fake language avoids linguists' primary goals of unraveling language: to understand its history, its culture, the thinking of its speakers. Klingon has no history, culture or—at this point—speakers. No sooner had he checked into the hotel and gone to the bar for a beer than a woman approached him.

“You wrote that Klingon Dictionary right?”

Oh great. “Yeah,” he says, sinking.

“I need to tell you something.”

“Okay.”

“I’m really serious.”

“Okay.”

He braces, but all he gets is a hint that Klingon is not done surprising him. “I need to tell you,” she says, “it’s really great there’s finally a linguistics book you can buy at the airport.”

Patient Zero & The Bible

Maybe the most interesting thing about sitting in on a meeting of fluent Klingon speakers is just how, well, *normal* it looks. No rubber foreheads or pasted-on beards, just folks in a video-chat talking decidedly terrestrial stuff like the day at work, the headlines, the family and the state of software in modern robotics. But I’m signed in for something different. As I listen, missing jokes and generally being a good-natured left-out, I’m on the hunt for patient zero.

By my count there were almost ten years between Okrand publishing the Klingon Dictionary and people speaking Klingon with any kind of fluency. But everyone I’ve met who has taught themselves Klingon has done so only after finding a current speaker (usually online) and deciding: “If they can, I can; and if anyone is, I want to.” That at some point, someone must have been the first is common sense. So who was it?

This week’s Klingon video-chat or *qepHom*—*qep* is essentially Klingon for meeting and *Hom* is a Klingon suffix similar to our adjective “small”—is just a pilot from British Columbia, a robotics expert slash high school instructor from Ohio and me. We—no—*they* are talking about a famous experiment set up to determine whether chimpanzees have a concept of fairness. They do, it turns out. But that’s really hard to explain in Klingon: a language of difficult-by-design pronunciation, tangled grammar (by your and my standards) and little more than 2000 words, most of which have to do with serving aboard starships in an interstellar empire. There’s certainly no word, to pick an example, for chimpanzee.

Which is a good prompt to bring up that really, right alongside my interest in finding out *how* people first taught themselves Klingon is the deeper question: *why*? I first asked a linguist—a prominent and respected linguist named George Lakoff—why people might find an invented, difficult and limited language like Klingon so appealing. “There are people,” he told me, “who are really into Star Wars stuff.” I wanted to delicately correct him, when he swept on. “They’re just Star Wars nerds, probably related to that old Dragons and Dungeons community, and they just want to live in a made up, fantasy world.”

Might seem harsh, but it also seems to be what most people think. It’s more or less what I had thought too, which is why I foolishly first tried to make friends in the Klingonist community (their word, not mine) by parading my longstanding Star Trek fandom around in front of me. But as I’ve already mentioned, I learned fairly quickly that speaking Klingon isn’t about Star Trek. So in our qepHom via Google Hangout, I first ask my new friends why they like keeping their Klingon conversations out of outer space.

Robyn (she goes by Qov in this circle) answers by asking me, “How would you describe a water fountain?” Well, I probably wouldn’t since I have a word for it. But if there weren’t a word for it (which in Klingon there isn’t), I’d probably have to explain it *conceptually*. As in, dig my heels in and decide just what I think a water fountain *is*, in the most clear and basic sense. How would you do it? Function—is it a means of propelling water upwards? Intent—is it a means of drinking water more easily? Form—will your listener know it by shape? Setting—would it be better to say something like “the place you drink water at a park”? (Assuming there’s a word for park in Klingon.) Just as most words can mean different things based on context and whether they’re being used figuratively, literally, ironically, etc., most *things* can be conceptualized using different approaches. We never have to think about this when we already know the word for something, but it’s something Klingonists have to do. And it’s something they like to have to do—to use Klingon to express what it’s not designed to express: not just water fountains but abstracts like love, capitalism, the internet. “If there’s something you think you understand,” Qov tells me, leaning in a little to the webcam, “translate it into Klingon.”

This language-as-playground obviously isn’t unique to Klingon. In our native languages we write poetry, play boggle and scrabble, and make puns. “But created languages,” says language creator John Quijada, “will open up many more opportunities for linguistic creativity and play.” His language, Ithkuil, actually works in much the same way as Klingon—though it’s more expansive—by constructing more and more specific meaning through a system of root words and modifying prefixes and suffixes. “What I show through Ithkuil are the limitations in natural human language in terms of what they don’t express: the incredible gap that goes on in our heads cognitively versus what comes out our mouth.” This is exactly the gap Robyn is talking about.

In our *qepHom*, I learn that this gap was integral to how this community came together in the first place: with a translation of the Bible. Probably the best place, I’m told, to start a search for patient zero is with a Lutheran Minister and languages

teacher named Glen Proechel; a man whose obituary (published by the US Chess Federation) said Proechel could play against 10 opponents at once in competitive chess, and whose work on the Klingon Bible translation project earned him a mention in a book titled *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Evangelical Christianity*.

In doing my homework on translation theory, I start to see that translation might be one of our best windows into the workings of language. Some linguists I've spoken to say it's even fair to think of language itself as translation: you're putting precise thoughts into an imprecise medium—words—which means you generally settle for “close enough.” Translation is that process again. Like Sait Jerome during his 4th century translation of the Bible into Latin, “I express not the word for word but the sense for sense.” I also quickly discover that not only is the Bible the most translated piece of literature ever, it's also the basis for most of the cultural thought and musing about the concept of translation.

As a species, we have produced a *ton* of Bibles. And I mean versions, not copies. There have been Bibles in some 2,400 different tongues, dialects and slangs, proving no language is too small, no culture too esoteric to have its own. “Somebody gwine aks say ‘How God gwine mek people wa done dead git op from mongst de dead an lib gin?’” goes a passage from the Bible in Gullah—a creole language spoken by very few on islands off the Southern end of the US East Coast. “He then breathed into the fireman's hose of this geezer, and would you Adam-and-Eve it, the dirt geezer started to live; God had obviously breathed fork into ‘im!’” the Cockney Bible tells us. (For those unfamiliar with the cockney rhyming slang: Adam-and-Eve—believe; fork—fork and knife—life.)

But Proechel was the first to look off-world for the Bible's next fertile field. “It won't hurt,” Proechel begins as delicately as he can in an essay penned for the International Society of Bible Collectors in 1995, “to think about the message of the Bible in a new medium.” More than bringing God into the lives of Klingon speakers and Trekkies, Proechel said, “the task of trying to explain the Gospel to people who live on another planet is mind opening.” Excited by what a Klingon Bible could do to improve Christians' understanding of their own faith, he reminds that, “most of the really great discoveries in science have been made when the scientists were not attacking the problem directly, but were ‘playing’ with it.”

The translation project involved 10 scholars, led by a graduate of Yale's Divinity School. And according to a pamphlet the translators put out, the project had two goals: 1) “To exercise and develop the language,” which at the time no one could speak fluently; and 2) “To benefit the translator by helping him or her develop a deeper understanding of the text.”

But it wasn't long before these two goals started a kind of tug-of-war over Klingon, and Proechel became a formative figure for the Klingons as much for kick-starting the Bible project as for being kicked out of it. I finally get hold of one of the translators on the project, a man named Mark Shoulson, who is one of a few people in the world who can both read ancient Hebrew and write in Klingon. He would go on to edit the (actually completed and published) Klingon translation of Hamlet once the Bible project was abandoned. I ask him about Proechel. The problem was,

says Shoulson, Proechel was trying to “translate the meaning and the spirit of the bible as a religious book.” In doing so, his perspective on Klingon didn’t fit with his fellow translators.

Eugene Nidal, probably the most influential thinker in the realm of bible translation, maintained that, “the Bible is not a sacred script, but the repository of a sacred story.” Which has given translators license to swap-out specifics to fit the new cultural landscape of the host language. Look at the Malay Bible, says David Bellos in his book on translation *Is That a Fish In Your Ear*. That translation ended up swapping a fig tree for *pisang*—banana. “But what this kind of cultural substitution really says,” writes Bellos, “is that you can’t really understand, and we aren’t going to try to explain. So have a banana instead.” Proechel wanted a bible that followed in this almost 2000-year history of bible translation, replacing whatever doesn’t exist in a culture with things that do. So “Christ” would be *Kahless*, the closest thing to a messiah figure from the Klingon culture portrayed on screen; the lamb would be the *targ*, the only Klinon animal mentioned, pretty much ever; and the cross would be the *claw*, a kind of tri-foil that stands as the symbol of the Klingon Empire. And so forth. But his cultural translation, not falling far from the banana tree, avoided what the others realized they specifically *wanted* to do—translate the figs into a language without them.

That’s the appeal of Klingon: the challenge to get a concept into uncooperative words. Since it has so few words but a flexible form, Klingon allows you to build what you might need by modifying existing root verbs and nouns with a system prefixes and suffixes. For instance, there is no Klingon word for “full” in the sense of eating a meal. One way to get around this is to use a Klingon word for “full”—in the sense that a glass is full, which doesn’t have the same connotation of not wanting any more to eat. So Klingonists in the early days started applying the Klingon suffix *Ha*—which is designed to flip a words meaning to its opposite—to the end of the word for hungry, *ghung*. While *ghungHa* is not in the Klingon Dictionary, it’s an elegant way to convey an idea without a ready word in the language. The same process uses *par* (dislike) to create *parHa* (dis-dislike—like), and *muS* (hate) to create *muSHa* (dishate—love). While Proechel was looking for analogies and parallels to swap in his translation, it was this plastic nature of Klingon that attracted most of the other translators to the project.

Another big problem with the translation was that Proechel’s approach came with the conceit that this space warrior culture existed, putting emphasis on the Star Trek universe rather than the language. It helped the other Klingonists realize they didn’t care about Star Trek or its villains as much as they did this language; that Klingon was much more interesting to them than Klingons. Shoulson wasn’t translating in order to bring the message to a new audience, but just so the messengers could dirty their hands in a tough translation. After a few months of rising tensions, Proechel was sent packing his bananas and the Klingonists soon dropped the Bible in favor of translating Hamlet. It was something of a declaration of independence. Klingon, afterward, would not be a vehicle for anything. Not Star Trek, not God. The speakers created some space in which the language could start to

develop a culture: theirs. The Klingon movement got going in earnest, continuing to pick up speed as their numbers grew from dozens to thousands over the next decade.

And it was while digging into how Proechel met up with the Klingonists in the first place that I finally found my patient zero. Before he thought of a bible, it turns out Proechel had the idea of a more direct way to bring God's word to the Klingonists: summer camp. He had organized many language camps before, and this one seems to have been a misguided play at both evangelism and profit, held in 1993 in Red Lake Falls, Minnesota. It yielded neither profit nor converts from the dozen or so Klingon enthusiasts who showed up, but it did show the dozen or so Klingon enthusiasts who showed up that there were at least a dozen or so people as interested as they were. They held beauty contests, read poetry, and played board games and softball—all in Klingon—though this last proved tough without words for “pitcher”, “safe” or “out.” Making do, they had the “gunner” throw the ball, while ump ruled a runner “dead” or “alive”. And, of course, Proechel held church services in Klingon as well.

He seems to have marketed his camp through a Klingon Language mailing list that lived in the depths of the early internet, to which Proechel's interest in languages had led him. The list had a few dozen subscribers, most of whom had only a casual interest in the Klingon language, none of whom were fluent. But there was one man much, much closer than anyone else.

“I had a buddy who called me up and informed me that he had discovered the Klingon Dictionary,” says Krankor, a computer programmer now living near Seattle. This was around 1990, and Krankor says he and his friend decided to learn it, just for fun. “All this time I assumed all the real fanatic Trekkie/Trekker types had probably already learned this and I was way behind, trying to catch up.” He asks me to stick with his Klingon handle, Krankor, in my writing, which is fine by me. If anything, it just adds to his mystique as planet Earth's first Klingon speaker. “My buddy got caught up writing a book about the Windows server and didn't have time to learn Klingon,” Krankor explains. “He started the mailing list so I could find other people to speak Klingon with.”

Slowly, the list started picking up subscribers. “I discovered, to my amazement,” he says, “that I was way ahead—that everyone else had looked at the book and thought ‘that's cute but that's way too hard’.” Proechel paid Krankor to be the main Klingon instructor at his camp. It was there that Krankor met Laurence Schoen, a kindred (though less experienced) Klingonist, forming the friendship that would form the Klingon speaking community.

Schoen would go on to organize the online Klingon Language Institute, a website that provides learning materials, puts out a regular newsletter, provides educational awards and scholarships for high school students and has held an annual conference every year since Proechel's camp. Today, their members rank in the thousands and are spread across 45 countries. But the most important thing the KLI would do in those early days for Klingon's popularity and longevity is to stand

as a central authority on matters of language usage. Because every language is an agreement: to use the same words, the same structure and the same tenses. If people don't agree, there's no language.

"We've talked about this with Dothraki," says David Peterson of the language he built for *Game of Thrones*. There are only a couple hardcore Dothraki speakers, but they face the same problem the Klingons did 20 years ago. There are words that will never be in Dothraki—like car, tweet, train, cell phone—and eager speakers want to fill the gaps, which could quickly kill the language. "If you don't have a set of standards, it's too easy to devolve into whatever anybody says goes," says Peterson. "Games are fun because you adhere to the rules. If you were playing Monopoly and landed on go to jail and then said, 'Hey I just pulled a king of diamonds from this other deck so I don't have to go to jail,' no one would play with you." Proechel had been one of the first to stretch the meaning of some Klingon words to cover things he needed, like figuring the word for "starship" might as well be used for "car". Through the KLI, Schoen and Krankor would enforce the community's first and foremost rule: if doesn't come from Okrand, it's not Klingon.

But the very first consequence of Proechel introducing Krankor to Schoen was bringing about the first ever Klingon conversation this side of a movie screen. The camp was held near a river down which these first Klingonists would go inner tubing. One day, Krankor and Laurence were having a conversation (in English) bobbing amongst a lot of other people tubing down the same river. The current drifted them far enough apart that their conversation was broken up, and to keep track of Krankor, Schoen decided to holler across the splashing distance, starting the first ever conversation in Klingon.

"Krankor! I had your mother, she was good!"

Game on.

"Then you must be my father," Krankor called back, in Klingon. *Vavoy* is the word he used, a more informal "father", like "dad".

"Vavoy!" called Krankor. He says people started looking at him like he was nuts, but he didn't care. He'd waited years to have this conversation. "Vavoy, can I have the keys to the ship? Vavoy, can I have some money?"

The Klingon boy & universal language

Three years have passed when little Alec Speers gets spooked after toddling too far from his father in the Burger King near their home in Washington DC. He cries out: "Vavoy! Vavoy!" Like Krankor, he's in public and earns the same strange glances saying it. And like Krankor, he doesn't really care, but for very different reasons. For one, he's sincere; for another, he's two years old.

Of course, you learn the most about a language from a native speaker. And while I'd love to hear how the offbeat structure of Klingon affects the thinking of its native speakers, it should go without saying that no one has ever been a *native* speaker of Klingon. And this is what I assumed, until I stumbled across the story of the boy who almost was. My first question when I track down D'Armond Speers, the man who almost 20 years ago decided to raise his son to speak Klingon, is a no brainer. "How did you ask your wife?"

Gently. And before you go for the pitchfork, it's good to remember that kids exposed to two languages in their early lives tend to have a cognitive advantage over their peers. And Speers made sure there could be no harm in teaching his son Klingon before he opted to try it. "It was about a month before my wife was due," says Speers, around 1994-95. He was working on his PhD in linguistics at Georgetown University. "I was rubbing her belly, and said 'I have this idea that I've been thinking about... and if you don't want to do it, we won't do it.'"

Speers caution reminds me of something I read about *Lord of the Rings* author J.R.R. Tolkien, that he called his fascination with creating language a "vice." He spoke of his "shame and shyness" surrounding it. And Ithkuil creator John Quijada described many conlangers as "being in the closet about their hobby." And while Quijada, Okrand and Dothraki creator David Peterson all mentioned that conlangs are losing their social stigma more rapidly than ever, 18 years ago Speers knew he had to tread lightly. But in his passion for language and excitement over fatherhood, he caught sight of an opportunity too extraordinary to pass up.

It only takes about two minutes of conversation with Speers for me to realize this: it is absolutely amazing I ever learned to speak in the first place. "If you think about the people who learn language—infants—they'll acquire language at about the same age," he says. And they'll learn at about the same rate. And they'll need no instruction or correction. Basically, they'll learn accidentally, by overhearing and mimicking. As an infant, I mastered a complex system that would take weeks or months of study and practice to master it as an adult. Rosetta Stone makes hundreds of millions of dollars each year on the promise of making it easy. (Incidentally, their April Fools prank this year was a "Klingon Language" product announcement.)

It amazes me how little we understand the overall process of language acquisition, yet how much we've been able to learn by examining it. "There's almost nothing you can say that all learners of language have been exposed to," says Speers. "So one theory is that we're born with some linguistic knowledge." What, like our brains might actually be hard-wired to "expect" certain things from language?

Pretty much. Up to this point, all my talk with Klingonists and linguists has been concerned with the software side of language: what we upload, how we upload it, and all the ways we use it once it's installed. So what about the hardware behind it? Pioneering linguist and social activist Noam Chomsky is probably the most famous to wonder: if language acquisition is so uniform for every human speaker, and every language, maybe we're all born biologically *ready* for it. As though there's some language template built into our brain biology, and all our languages are just

versions and variations of the root. This is probably why language, any language, is so easy for infants to learn. What better test of this than to teach your son to speak Klingon; the language built to be as inhuman as possible?

Speers' wife agreed to it, so long as she didn't have to learn Klingon herself. Speers devoutly only spoke to Alec in Klingon since the day he was born, while his wife continued to use English. And right away, he ran into the problems you might expect with using Klingon as your language of fatherhood. "I had words for shuttle craft and phaser and transporter ionization unit," Speers counts off. "But we didn't have a word for bottle. We didn't have a word for high chair." Klingon was missing "a lot of domestic things."

Speers basically saw two possible outcomes of teaching Alec Klingon. First, he might learn it as-is. And this would be pretty impressive, since Klingon was designed to break as many "universal" language traits as it could. Alec speaking dictionary-direct Klingon would suggest that our innate language template is a lot more flexible than we think. The other thing that could happen is that Alec could change Klingon, "fix" it to fit his infant language template. This, I was pretty astounded to find, is something kids do all the time.

"It's interesting to see how a language changes when it becomes a first language," says cognitive scientist Benjamin Bergen when I call his office at UC San Diego to ask what he thinks of Speers' experiment. It's a second before I muster a meager: What? Don't languages take eons to form? How often does a *new* language go through infant acquisition for the first time?

Well there is one kind of "new" natural language that pops up now and again. "One thing that has happened many times in the course of human history," says Bergen, "is that you bring people who speak different languages into close contact with one another." Look at Hawaii and its mix of Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, English, Tagalog and native Hawaiian speakers. "They can't all speak each others' languages, so they create a *pidgin*." This is a kind of half-baked language-casserole thrown together from bits of all the nearby languages. But pidgins are incomplete, pre-languages that lack regular grammar or tense. Bergen calls it "Lone Ranger-Tonto talk": you wouldn't have the words to say "I'm going home," but you could probably say "me go house".

But when children grow up speaking pidgin, says Bergen they—there's no real other way to put it—*fix* it. As they learn it, kids will "make it more language-like" without noticing. They create deeper means of expression, normalize conjugation for verbs and seem to "agree"—though this is all done unconsciously—on a regulated way of saying things. Suddenly, every verb will be past tense'd the same way, nouns will interact with verbs consistently, the whole thing will *realize* into a more complete language. Essentially, there seem to be things in language that, Bergen says, "humans want to have." If we don't find them, we will invent them as we learn the language.

But in fact, Klingon isn't the first created language to go through this. Bergen had told me that this process—called *creolization*—has even happened with

Esperanto; that is, children learning it have screwed up some of its careful rules, altered its structure, and made it more a usable day-to-day language than its creators could. But remember, Speers' experiment started in 1995. I had found a handful of articles about 2-year-old Alec speaking Klingon that ran about 18 years ago. Some people had been fascinated, some wanted child protective services called in, but either way it had raised a good amount of attention. Speers endured people contacting him telling him he should be imprisoned, castrated, killed, but he soldiered on speaking Klingon anyway. So what happened since?

"It was, to a limited extent, working," says Speers. "We kept doing it until just before he turned three." Pretty early, in lifespan terms. But pretty late in language terms. He had played Klingon language games with Alec, sang Klingon songs. They bonded over it, with Speers' getting less concerned about looking for results than enjoying the fun of a father-son secret language. Plus, no one sang a better rendition of "May the Empire Endure" than Alec, who belted out this Klingon lullaby with gusto and excellent pronunciation. "I would sit him on the ground and say to him: 'Where is your bottle?'" says Speers. Of course, he didn't have a word for bottle, so he'd use *Hlvje'* (drinking vessel), but Alec would easily understand and point to or pick up the items his father asked for. Alec would even answer in Klingon, and called his father almost exclusively *Vavoy!* "He wasn't just remembering words, but he was starting to get the language," says Speers.

But then, when Alec was almost three, something changed. He resisted playing games in Klingon, and stopped responding to his father in their exclusive language. While he could still seem to understand whenever his father spoke to him, he began almost exclusively answering in English.

It turns out that an infant mind is indeed a kind of super-flexible language sponge that can pretty much master anything you throw at it. But just because it can doesn't mean it always will. A developing brain will discard a language that doesn't seem useful, and Klingon's trial run was over after three years. What happened, Speers agrees with most of the linguists I've spoken with about this, is that Alec had—unsurprisingly—prioritized English over Klingon. He experienced English in every aspect of his life, and Klingon only while talking with his father. Children growing up with pidgin will expand and regulate the language because they have nothing else to work with. And kids raised to speak Esperanto often spend a lot of time in Esperanto daycare—*infanta congressetto*—in order to re-enforce the language's priority. But as Alec started resisting, his father didn't push him. "It was starting to affect my interaction with him," says Speers. "And that wasn't worth it to me."

Which ties perfectly into the other thing languages do. I've learned a lot already about how communicating an idea can help to solidify it, how our languages themselves change over time and how our brains *want* to use them. But language isn't just a way to say things, it's a way of belonging to a people. Pidgin—which varies in form from person to person—doesn't tie people together, but will be transformed by its first speakers into something that does. And while Speers' experiment failed in that it didn't reveal many new ideas about language acquisition,

it did succeed in bringing a father and son closer together. That's what our languages do.

Alec even tried to return to Klingon later, around high school, with a conscious desire to learn. And while he didn't end up reclaiming the Klingon he'd discarded as a kid—it was much tougher now that the process was conscious—he's probably the only Klingon-curious person ever who didn't have to go to the message boards or the Klingon Dictionary for help. He just asked his *Vavoy*.

Language: the us-maker & the undead

It's a chilly March night in Berkeley, California when I get to hear a language come back to life. I and about 50 people are gathered in the backyard of Heyday Books—a publishing house in an actual house, a grand turn-of-the-century Victorian converted into offices—listening to a young woman who stands halfway up the stairs to the outdoor balcony, reading off her purple spiral-bound notepad. We snack on deer jerky, miner's lettuce salad and sweet acorn bread while kids from the apartment complex next door lean on the fence, confused about what's going on, and a little excited knowing they weren't invited. They can't understand what the girl is saying, but that's okay, neither can anyone else.

She's speaking Mutsun, the language I'm here to hear, which was once used south and inland of the San Francisco Bay. For the last 25 years, Heyday has been publishing *News From Native California*—a magazine devoted to the history, social position and language of California tribes—and in that line they're hosting a night of songs and stories in native tongues. But the only dead language here tonight is Mutsun, which was spoken by about 3,000 people about 300 years ago who were decimated and scattered through interaction with their local Mission in the 1700s. While Mutsun people remain, their language was lost to the world when its last native speaker died in 1930. Luckily, it was preserved in two places: First, it was unusually well documented by the linguist J.P. Harrington, who spent his career chasing last native speakers hoping to preserve dying tongues; Second, it was the subject of the influential doctoral thesis by Mark Okrand, who tackled the difficult task of rebuilding the Mutsun grammar from Harrington's notes.

"We're here," says our reader Kanyon Sayers-Roods, a Mutsun descendent, for a moment dropping the language of her great grandmother, "awakening a language presumed to be dead." As the evening becomes night, the only light in the yard comes from the glowing Christmas lights winding up banister on the staircase serving as a podium. Over by the fence, a smiling woman brings the neighbor kids a few plates of acorn bread, which they take, losing a little interest now that they see they aren't crashers. To say Mutsun is dead is a little misleading. It might be better to say that it used to be.

I feel insensitive for thinking it—it seems a disrespectful connection to make listening to the eerie sounds of a language once extinct—but I keep thinking about

Star Trek IV: *The Voyage Home*. It starts with Kirk and crew stuck with an old Klingon ship, the Enterprise having been blown up in the last movie. In this probably silliest and possibly best of the Trek films, the fate of Earth depends on finding a pair of humpback whales, which by the 23th century have gone extinct. So Kirk's plan is to gain enough speed—by slingshotting around the sun—to travel back in time, pick up some whales from 1980 something and bring them back to save the future. And a primary tension of the film is that their unreliable Klingon vessel may not survive the trip through time. In all honesty this isn't a bad metaphor for Klingon and Mutsun, I think to myself as the latter is quietly read aloud for one of the few times this century.

The most direct connection between the two languages is that after completing Klingon, Okrand realized he had built some pieces of the native language into the alien one. Not much, really. The Klingon suffix *Daq* and the Mutsun suffix *Tak* are used in the same way: to tie a noun or verb to a location. But there's another connection that's a lot more interesting.

"Klingon is proof," says Arizona linguistics professor Natasha Warner and key figure in the Mutsun revitalization project. "Proof that you can teach yourself a language, use it fluently, and get together a community of people who speak it"—and here's the really important part—"without native input." Before Klingon, says Warner, this looked pretty impossible. Esperanto didn't break down the barrier, since that language was *designed* to be easy to pick up and use, whereas most Native languages are very hard for modern people to learn. Even Hebrew, which was reclaimed as the national language of Israel after centuries of dormancy, wasn't proof enough. Hebrew has always been used in ceremonies, and actually it got something of a makeover during its revitalization to cater to the Yiddish, Arabic and European language speakers who would have to learn it.

But Klingon, with its few dozen hardcore non-native speakers, difficult sounds and unexpected grammar, smashed the door of possibility wide enough for more languages to look through. This is where I find my irresistible flash of Star Trek IV: Mutsun is rescued from our past, brought into the future and a new life; all in a cramped Klingon vessel. It's a reductive way to look at it, because it plays down all the hard work of linguists and descendants that has gone into the revitalization: building a dictionary of words, holding lectures and lessons; and most importantly, teaching Mutsun children a handful of nouns to use in their daily lives. And as I remind myself of all this work—which has spanned the last 20 years—I begin to wonder what, aside from sentiment, makes revitalizing a language like Mutsun worth it all?

"Hey, listen, the purpose of language is to break down barriers between people," says Malcolm Margolin, the owner of Heyday and host of the evening. "It's a way of getting out of your head to share your loneliness." Margolin's look has been described as "rabbinic," he's a balding, eager talker with a bushy gray beard. And there's an irresistible feeling of gravity to our talk about talk. After 40 years in the work of native language revitalization, he's a guy who can think out loud with authority. For a Mutsun speaker re-navigating their people's language, he says, "it

connects you not only to your past, but to people; and this is wonderful.” Then he shrugs. “Klingon connects you to a world you share with others, and this is also wonderful.” Now he throws up his hands as though to double his shrug. “But it’s a different kind of wonderful.” Klingon and Mutsun also show in equal measure that as much as a people make a language, a language makes a people.

I think about this while a Hoopa woman—whose tribe originates in more northern Northern California—gets up to sing a song she says she’s just written. She’s laughing as she gets out a piece of paper and sings without accompaniment. She doesn’t treat Hoopa with the same care or solemnity Roods gave Mutsun. It’s almost as though Hoopa—which never died out—is somehow less fragile, still sturdy enough to be played with. But because none of us can speak it, her joke is hers and hers alone. Until she finishes and gives the translation as a punchline: “Smelly cat, smelly cat, what are they feeding you?”

It’s an *us* thing, I realize. In being *ours*, a language solidifies our idea of which we we belong to. And if we can leave Heyday and the Klingon Empire for a moment, we’ll find a kind of exaggerated example of this in Boonville—a town two hundred miles north of where Mutsun was spoken—where there once bloomed an unexpected and unique language among the farmers, herders and hunters in the isolated Anderson Valley. There, I got a chance to better understand the glue that binds together Klingonists.

Boontling, for Boont lingo, for language of someone from Boonville, began as a way to gossip about a newly knocked-up girl brought to Boonville to discreetly complete her pregnancy in the Anderson Valley hop-picking season. This was common since the Valley was almost entirely left alone by the rest of Northern California. Rural, rough and openly sympathetic with the South during the Civil war, its residents were not well liked by outsiders. Reading about it, I’m assailed by the 19th-century-ness of names like Phocian McGimsey, Syd Duff, Cecil Wightman, Carsie Rawles. Even modern descriptions of the valley find writers straining to avoid a term like “old timey.”

It started as a simple word-replacement system—largely used for dirty talk or *nonch harpin*—built on English, Spanish and Native words that had been “converted” into Boontling by a set system of abbreviations. For example, the word *castrate*—the sheep industry was booming at the time, so it was used a lot—would first become the self-explanatory *de-ball*, then the more inscrutable *deeble*. But soon, most of its words were references to people, places and formative events in town history. It became a language so culturally referential that you couldn’t understand it—even if you translated it—unless you had grown up in the Valley. The man who wrote the book on Boontling (and the only one who ever tried, a linguist named Charles C. Adams) had to learn a huge amount of valley history before he could get anywhere in the lingo. “An allusion to any one of over two hundred nicknames could have as many as a dozen different meanings,” he writes, due to “a shared, intimate knowledge of the personalities, physiognomies, habits, histories and ‘private’ lives of valley residents.”

It was a close-knit culture, knitted closer by Boontling. As one Boonter put it: “You couldn’t *afe*”—fart—“in Boont before noon without everyone in the valley’s knowing about it by sundown.” Eventually, speakers would convert new words into Boontling on the fly, to test their listeners’ grasp of the lingo. And, because events and nicknames dictated so much of the language, Adams describes most residents living with a kind of “stage presence.” Boonters took constant care to avoid embarrassment that could be immortalized in their nickname, eager to showcase wit or prowess that might change its connotation for the better. The language’s pervasiveness in the valley between 1880 and 1920 was such that after being drafted into World War one, local boy Phocian McGimsey remembers reporting for basic training and finding himself struggling “to learn English all over again.” It makes sense then that the thing that killed Boontling was that a generation of young men left for World War I, saw the world, and came back home having lost interest in insularity. Add to that a new road just after the War that made it easy to drive in and out of town, and Boonville’s identity was diluted by the outside world. And Boontling was abandoned.

Back in Heyday’s yard, a member of the Nomlaki Tribe, indigenous to the Sacramento area, climbs the stairs to say his piece. “Three years ago, we lost our last speaker,” says Cody Pata. “But I’m still here.” He didn’t grow up speaking Nomlaki, but he learned it as an adult from its last native speaker. A recent video of his, a performance of “America the Beautiful” in Nomlaki, went viral on YouTube in the wake of the backlash to Coke’s multi-lingual Super Bowl and the popular hashtag: *#speakamerican*.

That Pata and Heyday work so hard to bring definition and visibility to unregarded or scattered cultures frankly makes me amazed how Klingon could become a (sub)culturally binding agent in so little time. Like Boontling, like any language, it’s a force that includes your people; but just as importantly, it excludes those who aren’t your people. “You’d have to learn Klingon,” says Klingonist Alan Anderson, “to understand the joy at being able to express certain things that no one has ever been able to say before in Klingon.” In some ways, the language is the price of admission into a unique group. “It’s people with the same mindset—that the world is a wonderful place to learn in,” says Anderson. “Klingon is just one more thing to use to interact with these people.”

“The kind of people who enjoy that kind of thing,” says Krankor, “enjoy each other.” One young girl brought to a recent annual qepa’ (big meeting) of Klingonists by her father explained it nicely. “When I come here,” she said, “it’s a whole bunch of me surrounding me.”

“The things that gain you respect have to do with your skill level,” says Arica Okrent, in her book *In the Land of Invented Languages*. “Also, how funny you can be,” she says. “No one really cares if you have your own Klingon costume, but if you can translate Rolling Stones lyrics into Klingon, *and* sing them, *and* do it well, that’s really high value.” But one of the most pervasive traits among Klingonists is exactly what helped draw Mutsun out of the ether and into the future: fervor. These are

people who not only love what they do, but love that it seems impossible to try it in the first place.

As Pata begins his rendition of “America the Beautiful”, which to me sounds Hawaiian in its divided syllables and wide-mouth vowels, I consider the progress made by Native language revitalization in the wake of Klingon’s example. After 20 years of work from linguists and Native descendants, Mutsun doesn’t seem to have come very far. But Professor Warner tells me she’s thrilled and encouraged. Okay, no one is fluent in Mutsun. “But a few words is enough to give kids an identity,” she tells me.

Margolin, head of Heyday who likes to play a little closer the deep end, says just a few words can do more than help solidify a cultural identity. They can recall the particular way of thinking, of interacting with the world, that’s wrapped up in a language. That a lost language is a way of thinking waiting to be put back into words. “There’s something that re-echoes,” says Margolin, smiling at the thought. “The substance of the language is lost, but the pacing remains in the mind, and the rhythm remains in the mind.” He pauses, stumped for a moment in the attempt to explain something ill-suited to explanation.

“There’s a story I keep telling,” he says finally. “This guy down in Fremont would hunt sea lions during the depression and bring them back home to feed his family,” he says. Margolin tells the story like it’s the woman who swallowed the fly. Every day the man would haul his kills home through the marshes. He had to go through the marshes because he couldn’t be seen. He couldn’t be seen because Fish & Game would take his bounty and probably fine him. He didn’t want to lose the kill but dragging sea lion carcasses through the mud is hard work.

“One day, he was hauling a sea lion through the marshes and it slipped into a groove. As it slipped into the groove, it started to move easily along. And he realized he had found the groove that his families had been hauling sea lions up for thousands of years,” he said. “And now it moved easily.”

Klingon Christmas & thinking in language

Each year, before the start of rehearsal for *A Klingon Christmas Carol*, even before the first read-through of the script, translator/playwright Christopher Kidder-Mostrom gathers his cast for a calculated buzz-kill. “This is the hardest play you have ever done,” he tells them, letting each line of his mantra sink in. “It will probably remain, throughout your career, the hardest play you ever do. It will change who you are. It will change how you think.”

You’ll hear this kind of thing at a lot of first rehearsals, but for this one, it might just be true. “Every new Scrooge,” Kidder tells me, “will want to quit halfway through, and will be in tears.” First of all, the *Klingon Christmas Carol* is quite popular. About 1,700 people see it each year, and a lot are three or four-year vets.

“Many of these actors are used to shows that get 11 people per night,” says Kidder. That’s just the deal for many working actors in Chicago. But in *Klingon Christmas*, you’re a topic on Conan O’Brien. It makes the show a pretty big step for Klingon. It’s the most successful, most public face of the language; loved by as many normal people as die-hard Trek fans. But that big and eager audience wouldn’t be so daunting if it wasn’t for the Klingon itself. “It’s incredibly hard,” says Kidder. “For an actor doing this show the first time, it almost feels like futility.” So why go through it at all? As hard as it is to learn a play in Klingon, isn’t it a lot harder to write one?

“It’s gone through fourteen iterations since it started,” Kidder tells me. But it started as a joke. All Kidder knew about Klingon at the time was that it existed. He wasn’t a Star Trek fan, didn’t care about Klingon anything. His company, the then Minnesota-based Commedia Beauregard, was founded to produce translated plays. It made for interesting—and sometimes successful—projects like *The Jewelers* by Karol Józef Wojtyła. Kidder drops the name and waits a moment. Who? “Pope John Paul II,” he says. Pre-Pope, he’d been a playwright. *The Jewelers* was in part a publicity stunt, which is exactly what Kidder wanted for Commedia’s 2007 Christmas season. A nearby company had just performed an original called “Akespeareshay” at a recent festival and had been a hit. Kidder decided to do something the company had never done: translate an English play into another language. The more classic the work—and the more sensational the language—the better.

“How about Dickens?” an assistant had said at an early meeting. “And how about Klingon.” It got a pretty good laugh from the company, but Kidder wrote it down. What followed was a lot of research, many hours of watching Klingon-centric Star Trek films and episodes and pouring over the Klingon dictionary, and finally a long courtship process to get some Klingonists on his side. They’re a group used to being lampooned: in print, on *The Big Bang Theory*, on *The Daily Show*—they’ve learned to be wary. “Our first translation was wrong, but we had done enough for the Klingon speakers to take us seriously,” Kidder says. “With their help, we just kept revising it to get it right.”

In the first meeting with the cast each year, Kidder explains the process. You’re not only learning lines, you’re learning a language. Actors cast in a *Klingon Christmas Carol* go through a crash course early in the rehearsal process as Kidder flies in Klingon experts to explain the grammar, structure and theory of how Klingons put their thoughts together. They won’t become fluent, but they’ll definitely be thrown in the deep end. “I have sort of an okay ear for it,” says Clark Bender who plays Fezziwig—sorry, *veSIwIlg*. “But it was still a challenge.”

Part of Kidder’s pre-show mantra keeps coming back to me while he’s explaining his rehearsal process—“It will change how you think.” This echoes what a lot of linguists have told me about language: that imbedded in each is a different way of experiencing and understanding the universe. It’s an idea that, for me, takes a lot of digesting. “Every language affects how the people who speak it think,” explains Kidder. This is a problem he kept running into during the translation. “When we started, there was a lot of: ‘You can’t say that in Klingon because they don’t think

like that.” And even though they aren’t a real people, it’s a translator’s job to be true to the language he or she is working with. “If we don’t treat that language with respect, who’s to say we’ll treat any language with respect?” says Kidder. “If we don’t do it accurately, I just become a joke or someone commercially preying on the fans of Star Trek or this language,” says Kidder. “Either one is not desirable.”

But for the actors, it’s an even greater struggle. Remember, these aren’t the kind of language-keen people who are normally drawn to Klingon. “Learning Klingon forces the Actors to think linguistically,” says Kidder. And for the first time, wrap their minds around difficult ideas: that every language, even Klingon, has its own way of conceptualizing and experiencing the universe; and that language can’t think outside itself. I’ve heard this kind of thing a lot in my Klingon adventure, but what exactly does it mean?

John Quijada, creator of Ithkuil, always tells the same story to demonstrate how language can paint the world with very different colors. It’s the story of linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf at the edge of a lake watching a canoe being rowed toward him. He asks a Shawnee assistant, in Algonquian, to describe what he sees. When Whorf translates the response, he figures he must have made a mistake because what he came up with was something like, “Vector motion occurring at water surface toward goal.” He asks his Shawnee companion who nods and says, in Algonquian, “Yeah, that’s about right.”

See what’s going on? I didn’t. “Their root words aren’t things like trees or canoes,” says Quijada of the Algonquian languages. “They’re things like recoil, bifurcation, vector motions.” Still confused. “They don’t talk about *things*. They talk about *processes*,” says Quijada. “The things we call ‘things’ are just the *manifestations* of these processes.” Forget Klingon, Algonquian sounds pretty alien to me. Their grammar goes beyond describing the scene differently, and actually points to an understanding of motion different from mine.

Suddenly I remember the first time a computer programmer friend explained to me the idea that numbers are arbitrary; or at least, our way of organizing them is. I told my friend that’s crazy. Numbers are numbers. Math is math. But even if the idea of using numbers to conceptualize and organize amounts is universal, the idea that our numbers should go 0-1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9 and then restart in a new set of tens *is* arbitrary, it’s just very hard for us to see it that way. Counting probably started on fingers, so ten made sense, but it could have easily been any other base number. 1-2-3-4-5-6-new set or 1-2-3-4-new set.

The point is that if we’re not careful, it’s easy to think how we see things is the way things are. Our language, just like our number system, is an evolving attempt to organize and classify the astounding complexity of the world around us. It makes sense, now that the Klingon learning curve has *made* me think about it, that there would be more than one way to put that picture together. My language may not necessarily lock me into one way of conceptualizing the world, but it definitely gives me a bias to understand it in English terms: canoes not vector motion, things not processes. So I had to wonder: what else don’t I know about how I think?

You have to travel far enough from your own language to notice how it affects your perception of reality. Klingon works well for this because it is very unlike English. Klingon is verb-heavy with few adjectives. You can modify Klingon's verbs with prefixes and suffixes to add meanings like "slowly" or "with anger" but there aren't many pure adverbs. I asked one Klingonist what this would sound like in English, and he told me this: You can't really refer to a party, but you can refer to partying or partygoers. "Klingons," Alan Anderson told me, "are all about what they do." Well I didn't study Klingon, but I did learn French and Spanish—why didn't they expose to me any guiding perspective hiding in English? Anderson tells me I didn't venture far enough from shore. French, English, Spanish, German, Italian, and other Western European languages really aren't very different from each other, conceptually speaking; in the grand scheme of human language they're cousins, if not siblings. You'll spot a few differences like gendered nouns and backwards word orders, but you need more to start thinking outside your language.

There are Native American languages, for example, that actually incorporate direction into their grammar. Verbs are conjugated based on where the shoreline is in relation to action taking place. The language fosters such a keen sense of position in its speakers that they develop a sense of direction bordering on—from my English perspective—supernatural. And speakers of Mandarin, a tonal language, are proven to have a better ear for identifying intervals in music. Their language has made them so attuned to the pitch changes that affect the meaning of every syllable in their language, they hear the world differently (maybe even more precisely) than I do. It almost sounds like language-given superpowers, which makes me eager to interrogate my own language and the way it frames my experience of the universe.

I soon find that English is full of hidden linguistic biases and conceits that guide our thinking, but they're hard to spot if you're not ready to learn Klingon or Algonquian. "Thing about our metaphors," says cognitive scientist Benjamin Bergen, ready with a good example. "We like to talk about economic inequality as a *race*. Some people have a *head start*, some are *falling behind* or *can't keep up*." It can be hard to even spot these cultural metaphors as metaphors—since we're so used to them, and they seem to us to make so much intuitive sense—but they can do a lot to guide how we think. Unlike a race, after all, our economy is full of people succeeding between the first and last. An ill-fitting metaphor like this might actually sap some of our faith in upward mobility: in a race, the other guy's insurmountable lead can make you feel like a chump for still running.

"Look at how much we talk about time as currency," says Dothraki creator David Peterson. We *spend* time. We *waste* and *lose* it. We can even *run out*. "A cultural byproduct of talking/thinking about time in this way," says Peterson, "is that we will often feel guilty about doing things our body needs, like relaxing, sitting down and doing nothing for an hour or two." It will feel like *wasting* time, which will make us tense and kill our ability to relax. Even our lingo-cousins like French and Spanish don't do this. We work the longest hours, and have the biggest problems with stress and anxiety. While it's simplistic to think this is all because of our cultural metaphor's fault, the language is thought to play a part in the problem.

I realize our deep-set currency metaphor doesn't stop there. We can waste *words* too. We're constantly *gambling* in conversation: "I bet you're lying." We even talk in terms of commercial transaction: "I said my sister ate my homework and my teacher bought it!" There are metaphors even harder to notice. Consider this: a year can't be *long*, since time has no spatial dimension. We're *moved* to tears though we're not moving anywhere. And temperature doesn't *go up*, it increases. (We can probably thank the thermometer for our inclination to think of *more* and *fewer* degrees via their position on a vertical scale.) As English speakers, we're locked into these metaphors, which flow like currents beneath our words and grammar, guiding our thinking in defined courses.

And more and more, these concepts are being built into constructed languages. David Peterson had a lot of fun designing metaphors in Dothraki that would illustrate a worldview different from ours. "In English, trees are conceptualized as torsos, with the leafy part as a head," he says. But in Dothraki, the tree itself is a head: you have the neck (the trunk) and the throat (under the bark on the trunk). "Conceptually, you always talk as though trees are facing away from you—you're looking at the back of the head." And here's the fun part. "So when you put something behind the tree, you're putting it in front of it; in front, you're behind." It's his own little joke about linguistic relativism, an exaggeration of the concept that makes it easier for us laypeople to spot. In Klingon, Peterson teases gently, Okrand missed some of these opportunities. Look at the primary Klingon starship, which is called a *Bird of Prey*. "In English we talk about ships in a particular way: the nose; the bridge. One of the things I thought was a real loss in Klingon is that they should have talk about the ship in terms of birds: the beak, the tail, the bowels."

It's a lot to take in, but a version of this is what actors are exposed to—usually for the first time—within weeks of being cast in *A Klingon Christmas Carol*. Many will begin to see the conceits and metaphors built like a system of invisible handrails in language, guiding our thoughts in different directions. And most say the Klingon sticks with them. "You can't unlearn it, let's put it that way," Kidder says. Some of the more novel elements of Klingon language construction remain part of the actors' thinking long after the end of the show's run. I ask him for an example, and he says he has a silly one. "There's this way of turning any Klingon sentence into a curse by putting the word *jay'* at the end of it," says Kidder. His wife explains it like this: "Putting *jay'* at the end of any sentence turns it into a line delivered by Samuel L. Jackson." So if you wanted to, you could say, "I'm tired of these snakes on this plane *jay'*." It's a little thing, says Kidder, but it's a sign that a new piece of thinking has made it across languages. I tell him I believe him.

And actually, I do. My own adventure with Klingon, which began and ended with his play, has awakened in me a greater awareness of language. Seeing first Okrand then the Klingonists play with their relationship to language has made me much more inclined to interrogate mine, to try to consciously see how it works. From the history embedded in every word of English to the gap between my thoughts and my ability to express them; from how I learned and learn to use my

language, to how it ties me to other people and informs my concept of *us*. Finally, my Klingon adventure has allowed me a tiny peek at my language from the outside, from where I can see the traps and limits of being born into any one tongue; as well as the surprises and opportunities.

Klingon speakers are quickly written off by linguists, writers and even Star Trek fans. But I think I understand why most linguists feel that made up “conlang” languages deserve no credit for advancing our understanding of language. They probably don’t, since conlangs like Klingon and Ithkuil are basically just mediums in which to play with what has already been discovered about language. But just because Klingon can’t teach *us* more about *our* relationship with language doesn’t mean it can’t teach *me* more about *mine*. Klingonists take an investigation into the nature of language into their own hands; it’s guerilla linguistics studied by and benefiting none but its speakers. At the end of the day, Klingon is nothing more or less than a shared space for like-minded people to explore, to play and to bond without necessarily going where linguists have never gone before.

And *Klingon Christmas Carol* makes it seem like the appeal of this play-language is wider than you’d think. On any given night, the audience is split into thirds. “One third are die-hard Trekkies,” says Kidder. They’d probably check in even if the play was no good. “One third are people who think ‘That’s so weird, I just have to try it.’” And the other third are thinking, “This thing is going to crash and burn so bad, I have to see it.”

That group is the most likely to come back again. “Because,” Kidder explains, “they are changed.” The goal of all storytelling is to change people, he says. “That is what was accomplished by both Gene Roddenberry” — the creator of Star Trek — “and by Charles Dickens.” Commedia Beauregard dedicates the play to these two very different men from two very different eras, who both, says Kidder, “challenged us to be better than we are.” And audiences seem to have responded jubilantly to the challenge of accepting Klingon as a place in which to play. *Klingon Christmas* ran last year in two cities—Chicago and Cincinnati—and more troupes across the country have approached Kidder for performance rights.

Twenty-some years have realized Klingon, and in that time it has come alive off the screen, off the page, to finally take an odd place at the table of human communication. And this makes it unique in the universe. One thing you get with created languages, Klingonist Alan Anderson explained to me, is the problem of the dancing bear. “You admire it not for how well it dances, but that it dances at all.” People often produce stories, plays, songs, in conlangs. But most of them are sloppy and built on in-jokes for the in-crowd. But *A Klingon Christmas Carol* marks a kind of coming out or moving up for Klingon as a medium.

“It has got to the point that you get to admire the dancing itself.”

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