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# From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages
## ☙ A Review ❧

## Don Boozer

**From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages.** *Michael Adams, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Nov. 2011. c.294 p. index. ISBN13: 9780192807090. $19.95.*

     *From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages* is a welcome addition to the small but growing corpus of works on the subject of invented languages. The collection of essays was edited by Michael Adams, Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of English at Indiana University Bloomington and Vice-President of the Dictionary Society of North America. Not only does Adams serve as editor, he also writes complementary appendices to accompany each of the contributed essays to expand on a particular aspect or to introduce related material. Adams' previous works include *Slang: The People's Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

     Although Oxford University Press is known for its scholarly publications, the title *From Elvish to Klingon* would suggest that the book is geared toward a popular audience. Both Elvish and Klingon are artistic languages devised for well-known fictional settings, namely *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek*, respectively (although in the case of "Elvish," the languages came first). As such, the distance "from Elvish to Klingon" is not far and does not begin to encompass the wide range of topics covered in the contributed essays. The essays themselves run the gamut from popular culture to erudite scholarship, adding to the overall fuzzy focus as to the intended audience. Is *From Elvish to Klingon* meant to be akin to Arika Okrent's very accessible and informative *In the Land of Invented Languages* (Spiegel & Grau, 2009)? Is it meant to be a scholarly work like Sarah Higley's *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown*

*Language: An Edition, Translation, and Discussion*[1] (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)? Is it meant to be a history of language creation like Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1995)? A better title could have been "From Adam to Zamenhof" since Adams spends considerable time in his introductory essay explaining how, in his view, the search for the original language of Adam in the Garden of Eden was the beginning of language invention. Additionally, one essay in particular discusses L.L. Zamenhof's creation, Esperanto, in great detail. The alternative "From Adam to Zamenhof" would not have been nearly as recognizable to a wide audience or as provocative to a scholarly one as mentioning Klingon and Elvish. The inclusion of two popular invented languages in the title would appear to have been a clever marketing decision and not necessarily to convey the full content of the book itself.

Adams acknowledges the scattered focus of the book when he says that he "tried to invent a book from what [he] was given, but not from dissatisfaction." Readers will not be dissatisfied either, but this mention of dissatisfaction comes from one of the primary motivations for language invention that Adams discusses in his introductory essay. He posits a spectrum of motives for language creation that includes "dissatisfaction with available natural languages" and curiosity as to what is linguistically possible. Adams returns to this theme of dissatisfaction repeatedly, in some ways giving too much weight to this one motivation. Granted, dissatisfaction with natural languages often does play a role in the invention of international auxiliary languages; however, J.R.R. Tolkien (in his seminal *apologia* "A Secret Vice") insists that a major motivation for artistic language invention is simply about taking pleasure in it.

To encompass the diverse topics covered in the essays he was given, Adams uses the metaphor of a "spectrum of invention." "The practice of [Joyce, Beckett, and Muldoon] and similarly inventive writers pushes the issue of what we mean when we say 'a language' is 'invented': we speak of a particular literary style as 'a language' metaphorically...Literary invention of this kind rests at one end of the spectrum of linguistic invention; full-blown language creation [such as J.R.R. Tolkien

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[1] See also Henry, Jim. 2008. "Review of *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Translation and Discussion*." FL-000001-00, *Fiat Lingua*, <http://fiatlingua.org>. Web. 01 October 2011.

and Marc Okrand] is at the other end..." Adams appears to be expanding the definition of the title's "invented languages" to make it almost meaningless. If "inventive writers" who engage in playfulness with language and masterful wordcraft are to be included under language inventors, then writers as diverse as William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, and Tom Robbins could arguably be included in that list. Many conlangers would see the spectrum of invented languages as going from bare-bones creations like Lapine, Newspeak, or even a substitution cipher like Al-Bhed to "full-blown" invented languages like Quenya, Klingon, or Ithkuil. The outlier essay in the book ("'Oirish' Invention: Joyce, Beckett, Muldoon") was written by Adams' colleague Stephen Watt at the University of Indiana Bloomington and appears to have required this expanded definition of invented languages for its inclusion in the book.

The first contributed essay is by Arden R. Smith, a member of the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship (an "international organization devoted to the scholarly study of the invented languages of J.R.R. Tolkien"[2]) and a columnist and editor of their print journal *Vinyar Tengwa*r. He has contributed to *Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on the History of Middle-earth* (Greenwood Press, 2000), various volumes of *Tolkien Studies* (West Virginia University Press), and the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (Taylor & Francis, Inc./Routledge, 2006). Smith received his Ph.D. from the University of California Berkeley in 1997 with the thesis *Germanic Linguistic Influence on the Invented Languages of J.R.R. Tolkien*. With his extensive expertise in Tolkien's languages, Smith's essay in *From Elvish to Klingon* is, oddly enough, on the subject of international auxiliary languages. Smith *is* involved with these languages, even maintaining a website completely in Volapük[3]. Even though he seems the perfect contributor for an essay on Tolkien's languages, Smith does an excellent job in outlining the history and development of international auxiliary languages: Volapük and Esperanto in particular but also Spokil, an *a priori* language by Adolph Nicolas; the Germanic auxlang projects of Elias Molee; Langue bleue (Bolak) by Léon Bollack[4] and others. One interesting fact that Smith gives in his

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[2] http://www.elvish.org

[3] http://home.earthlink.net/~erilaz/volapop.html

[4] See also Chapman, H. S. 2010. "Léon Bollack and His Forgotten Project." FL-000002-00, *Fiat Lingua*, <http://fiatlingua.org>. Web. 01 November 2011.

essay is that the designations of *a posteriori* and *a priori* constructed languages dates back to the early 20th century to the works of Louis Courturat and Léopold Leau.[5]

The task of contributing the actual essay on Tolkien's linguistic creations fell to Edmund (E.S.C.) Weiner and Jeremy Marshall, co-authors (with Peter Gilliver) of *The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Weiner and Marshall are the Deputy Chief Editor and an Associate Editor in Science, respectively, at the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Marshall also co-authored *Questions of English: Your Questions about the English Language Answered by the Oxford Dictionaries Team* (Oxford University Press, 1995). Weiner and Marshall do a thorough job of putting the "Elvish" languages of the book's title (i.e., Tolkien's Quenya and Sindarin) into literary, linguistic, and historical context.

The next essay in the collection, Howard Jackson's "Invented Vocabularies: The Cases of Newspeak and Nadsat," comes closest to setting one solid end-point in the spectrum of invented languages with which many conlangers might agree. Newspeak from George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* and Nadsat from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* are prime representatives of the rudimentary level of conlanging. The two "languages" are specifically intended to be "invented vocabularies" not full-blown languages, foreshadowing the "flavour languages" in video games described in James Portnow's later essay. The idea of "invented vocabularies" is nothing new and can be traced at least as far back as Athenaeus of Naucratis' work from the 3rd century CE, *Deipnosophistae* (*Banquet of the Learned*), *Book III*. Newspeak and Nadsat are two well-known and respected modern interpretations of this phenomenon. It is interesting to note that Orwell includes a treatise on Newspeak as an appendix to *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* echoing Tolkien's extensive Appendices in *The Lord of the Rings*. Jackson's essay addresses scholarly, political, and sociological themes while at the same time continuing to appeal to a lay audience. It is unfortunate that the only credentials of Howard Jackson that are shared (in the edition reviewed) were that he is "now retired from a career as a professor of linguistics."

Adams complementary appendices accompanying Weiner and Marshall's and Jackson's essays are a brief selection of published criticism and commentary on

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[5] *Histoire de la langue universelle* (1903) and *Les nouvelles langues internationales* (1907)

Tolkien's languages and Nadsat. It is very interesting to see the overall positive view toward Tolkien's creations and the mixed reception of Burgess' Nadsat.

The next essay, focusing on Klingon, was co-authored by none other than Marc Okrand himself, creator of the alien warrior's language. The other co-authors, in addition to Michael Adams, are Judith Hendriks-Hermans and Prof. Sjaak Kroon. Hendriks-Hermans' Master of Arts thesis from Tilburg University (Netherlands) in 1999, supervised by Kroon, was entitled *Klingon and its Users: A Sociolinguistic Profile.* [6] Kroon remains at Tilburg University as Professor and Chairman of the Department of Culture Studies. The credentials of the co-authors make them eminently qualified to pen the essay on Klingon, and they do not disappoint. A number of interesting demographic findings, primarily from Hendriks-Herman's study, are included although it is helpful to remember that the study is now twelve years old. There is one black mark on an otherwise interesting and informative essay. The authors provide the anecdote that the Multnomah County Hospital in Portland, Oregon "advertised for an interpreter fluent in Klingon," giving a false impression of the importance of that event. According to the debunking website Snopes.com[7], there unfortunately does not appear to have been any advertisement, any hiring process, or any funds spent on the procurement of a Klingon translator for the hospital, thus taking some of the fun (and relevancy) out of the story.

An interesting connection between Klingon and Tolkien's languages is brought out in the essay, although not explicitly. The Klingon essay describes some of the vocabulary creation derived from puns and wordplay: "For example, *Hat* (which sounds somewhat like English 'hot') means 'temperature'; *'om* means 'resist', based on the ohm, a unit of electrical resistance; *mon* is 'smile', as in Mona Lisa ... and the word for 'joke' is *qID* (resembling English 'kid')." In Weiner and Marshall's essay concerning Tolkien, one finds reference to an early root SAHA 'be hot' which gives rise to *Sahóra* 'the South' (i.e., "Sahara") as well as *Atalantë* "Downfallen" (a name of the sunken island of Númenor) akin to "Atlantis." Being that Klingon and Elvish are given such prominence in the title, it is surprising that Adams doesn't call attention to this tangential connection in his complementary appendices. This use of *a posteriori* vocabulary development for invented languages could possibly have

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[6] The thesis is available online at http://www.judion.de/klingon/Scripdef.html

[7] http://www.snopes.com/humor/iftrue/klingon.asp

been one of several unifying threads of which the editor could have used to tie the disparate essays together.

Adams' accompanying appendix to the Klingon essay looks at "Advanced Klingon" and provides an excerpt of the Klingon translation of *Hamlet*. While parallel texts of the two versions (*Hamlet* and *Khamlet*) are provided, an interlinear translation of the alien text would have helped underscore the utility of Klingon as a working language. In Adams' later appendix on "Synthetic Scots", the Scots vocabulary is glossed in a sidebar. A similar treatment for *Khamlet*'s lines would have been useful.

Next, James Portnow provides what Adams says is, to the best of his knowledge, "the first serious account of languages invented for online role-playing games." Portnow is well-qualified to contribute an essay in this area. He received a Masters in Entertainment Technology from Carnegie-Mellon University in 2008, is CEO of Rainmaker Games, and contributes as a freelance journalist to numerous gaming industry magazines and websites including being listed as an "Expert Blogger" by the well-respected website Gamasutra[8]. Interestingly enough in relation to this essay on language, Portnow also received a bachelor's degree in Classics from St. John's College, Santa Fe (New Mexico) Campus.

According to Portnow, video games have "generated a slew of strange dialects and spawned a thousand tongues" which may be a bit of a hyperbole. Even so, his answer to why this may be the case is that "game design attracts the sort of mind likely to invent a language." Unfortunately, Portnow doesn't say what "sort of mind" this is but does echo Tolkien when he says that one of the reasons is that "language is a form of play." He echoes Tolkien again in saying that languages "express a great deal about the peoples and cultures to which they are attached." Tolkien asserted that a language will give rise to a mythology, and Portnow seems to be in agreement in that a language will reflect the culture of characters and lands developed for gaming platforms and can provide a richer experience for players.

Portnow provides a new designation to add to the existing conlang classifications (e.g., artlangs, auxlangs, and engelangs) ~ "flavour languages" ~ which he defines as "an incomplete language often comprising only a few sentences". These are meant to, as the name implies, add "flavour" to a game without a full-fledged

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[8] http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/author/JamesPortnow/150/

grammar or vocabulary. Among the flavour languages Portnow discusses are Gargish from *Ultima IV*; D'ni from the *Myst* series of games; Logos from the ill-fated *Tabula Rasa*; Simlish, a gibberish standing in for a language in *The Sims* series; Al-Bhed, a substitution cipher masquerading as a language within *Final Fantasy 10*; and 1337 or Leet, the alternative alphabet for transcribing English[9]. The descriptions of Gargish, D'ni, and Logos provide fascinating reading and fit nicely on the spectrum of invented languages. Logos appears even to have had the potential to be a very sophisticated artlang. Al-Bhed, even though it is a cipher, is used convincingly as a language among the characters of *Final Fantasy 10* and can also be included comfortably as an elementary "flavour language." On the other hand, Simlish and 1337 once again could be seen as examples of Adams' stretched definition of invented language.

Where Portnow's foray into popular culture and gaming is conversational and highly accessible, the essay following it ~ "'Oirish' Inventions: James Joyce, Samuel Becket, Paul Muldoon" ~ is the most erudite and scholarly of all the essays in the book. This dichotomy and sudden shift in tone underscores the book's split personality (i.e., popular vs. scholarly). The author, Stephen Watt, has impeccable credentials when it comes to writing about these three Irish authors: Professor and Associate Dean of the Department of English and Adjunct Professor of Theatre and Drama at Indiana University Bloomington, author of *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), *Joyce, O'Casey, and the Irish Popular Theatre* (Syracuse University Press, 1991), and co-author of *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Indiana University Press, 2000).

Watt, similar to Adams, emphasizes the "strong motive for inventing language" as the dissatisfaction of Joyce, Beckett, and Muldoon with the adequacy of English to express their ideas. This theme continues as part of Adams' distorted spectrum of what it means to invent a language. In reading Watt's exemplary and fascinating exposition, one is confronted with the two spectra working at odds in the book: the traditional conlang spectrum ranging from basic naming languages to complex, fully-formed invented languages and the second literary language spectrum from straightforward journalistic reportage to the "linguistic invention" of writers

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[9] e.g., L4n6U463 or |4|\|6|_|463 for the word "language"

like James Joyce. Attempting to cover both the literary genius of Joyce and the linguistic genius of Tolkien in the same book does both authors a disservice in the end.

This is not to say that some of the techniques of the Irish authors described in Watt's essay would not fit comfortably on the traditional conlang spectrum: For example, Joyce's obsession with etymology and his neologisms that parallel, in some ways, the "invented vocabularies" of Newspeak and Nadsat. Watt goes out of his way to point out that "Joycean invention, however, involves more than neologisms and puns" as if to subordinate the conlang spectrum to the seemingly more significant literary language spectrum.

Oddly enough, it is Adams, in his "The Case for Synthetic Scots" (the complementary appendix to Watt's essay), who brings the focus back to the conlang spectrum using the case of the revitalized (and artificial) Scots language. This focus on a synthetic form of a regional language provides the perfect segue to the final contributed essay by Suzanne Romaine.

Romaine's essay, "Revitalized Languages as Invented Languages," examines language planning and the resurrection or revitalization of marginalized or near-extinct languages. Prof. Romaine is currently the Merton Professor of English Language at Oxford University (a post held by J.R.R. Tolkien himself from 1945 to 1959). She has done fieldwork in Scotland, England, Papua New Guinea, and Hawai'i and was also a member of the team that wrote the 2003 UNESCO position paper *Education in a Multilingual World* [10].

Romaine's fascinating, in-depth essay looks at whether "reinvented languages" like Modern Hebrew, Quichua Unificado, Cornish, Néo-breton, School/University Hawaiian, and others can be considered types of "invented languages." Romaine appears to come down firmly on the side of agreeing that there are parallels between languages as distinct in origin and use as Modern Hebrew (or Israeli) and Klingon: "The idea of a modern standard Hebrew as the language of a secular Jewish state sprang from the mind of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, no less than Klingon did from the imagination of its inventor Marc Okrand." Where these revitalized languages should fall on the conlang spectrum of language invention is a matter of debate; however, that they belong appears to be without question.

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[10] Paper available online at http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf

*From Elvish to Klingon* ends with Adams' final appendix, "A Reconstructed Universal Language," where he revisits the search for the language of Adam and the theme of dissatisfaction with existing languages. Adams also seems in this appendix to reject his original spectrum metaphor: "a spectrum is not the only nor even the best metaphor to explain linguistic invention and invented languages." Finally, Adams seems to come to the realization that trying to conflate those two distinct spectra is not possible without contorting each into uncomfortable shapes.

Even with its ill-defined focus, *From Elvish to Klingon* belongs on the reading list of all those interested in the world of invented languages, conlangers and non-conlangers alike. Although the essays sometimes cover topics with which many will already be familiar, even those areas provide insightful commentary and some novel information. With its thought-provoking ideas, interesting facts, and in-depth coverage of selected topics, *From Elvish to Klingon* should appeal to a wide audience, and everyone should find at least one essay that speaks directly to his or her curiosity.

*[NOTE: The above review is based on an advance reader copy of **From Elvish to Klingon**. Some minor changes may occur between the edition reviewed and the final published volume.]*

## ❧ About the Author ❧

*Don Boozer has been interested in invented languages ever since discovering Dr. Seuss's **On Beyond Zebra** in his elementary school library in the 1970s. Boozer's previous articles include "I Want to Speak Elvish! Teens and the World of Imaginary Languages" (**VOYA: Voice of Youth Advocates**. August 2007),"Speaking in Tongues: Literary Languages" (**Library Journal**, Reader's Shelf column. September 15, 2006), and "Playing God: If Language Is a Divine Punishment, Why Are 'Conlangers' Creating More of Them?" (**The Linguist Magazine: Official Journal of the Chartered Institute of Linguists** (UK). July/August 2006). A librarian by trade, Boozer created the exhibit **Esperanto, Elvish, and Beyond: The World of Constructed Languages** which appeared at the Cleveland Public Library in 2008 and the 3rd Language Creation Conference in 2009. Boozer currently serves as Secretary/Librarian of the Language Creation Society and maintains **The Conlanger's Library** online.*