

This is an Essay:
The Language and Legacy of Láadan (Evidently)
 Kelly Rafey

Excerpt

In general, what is most attractive about Láadan is not the grammar or the phonetic accessibility, but the vocabulary. The first hundred words that Elgin created were based on the Swadesh list, and became the core vocabulary that she used to assemble many of the more complicated words she later developed (*Language Imperative* 203). After Elgin had decided on a general grammatical structure she began to translate the nativity story of the King James Bible, which, in her opinion, is “the most ‘masculine’ document, linguistically” (204). As she translated, Elgin began to craft new words, arbitrarily and out of her initial list, to expand the vocabulary and fill the lexical gaps that she noticed in English. She intentionally made the process of adding new words to Láadan relatively easy, giving Láadan “ample – and extremely simple – ways to increase the vocabulary so that others could continue with the task” (204). Elgin wanted Láadan to grow, for people to adopt it and make it their own, so adding vocabulary was essential.

Though the vocabulary is *a priori*, many words in Láadan were not invented randomly. Elgin made the word *oódoo* (bridge), for example, because she felt that “its tune makes the shape of a humpback bridge,” and she created *rul* (cat) based on the purr of a cat (Elgin, “Notes on Adding to Vocabulary”). Many of the words on the Swadesh list were utterly arbitrary, but as the language expanded, Elgin incorporated and combined them into new words whose meaning would be enriched by their root words. *Láadan*, for example, is a conglomerate of *láad* (to perceive externally) and *dan* (language). The word for bee, *zhomid*, comes from *zho* (sound) and *mid* (creature). *Odayáaninetha*, or branch, is from *oda* (arm), *yáanin* (tree), and *-tha* (the suffix that denotes possession by birth). And *boshum*, or cloud, is derived from *bo* (mountain) and

shum (air). With this initial pattern of forming words out of smaller roots, Elgin soon had a vocabulary that far surpassed her initial goal of a thousand words – and she outlined the way for others to extend the vocabulary even further (*Dictionary and Grammar* 5). Words such as *lemadama* (to cuddle, literally: gentle-touch), *yuloma* (wing, literally: wind-hand), and *óolewil* (menstrual blood, literally: moon-river), and countless more words have been added to the Láadan vocabulary by various supporters of the language.¹ Because Láadan is not privately owned, anyone in the world can propose vocabulary. Based on words such as *lanemid* (dog, literally: friend-creature), *dithemid* (cow, literally: voice-creature), and *óowamid* (dragon, literally: fire-creature), one can confidently propose words such as *óomanibemid* (octopus, literally: eight-foot-creature), and people are invited to do so.

The meaning of every word in Láadan can be expressed in English, but Láadan excels at expressing precise emotions in the space of a single word. This contributes to the language's efficiency, but more so it works to mold a new “reality” for the speakers. According to Elgin's Whorfianism, the vocabulary available to Láadan speakers would enlarge not only their ability to express their exact emotions, but would enforce the belief that their emotions are neither shameful nor unusual. It is not odd or discordant with the rest of a population for a Láadan speaker to be *ráahedethilh* (musically or euphonically deprived), or to inwardly perceive *balara* (futile anger for good reasons with someone to blame) because someone *eril radamalh* (non-touched with evil intent) them. Emotions are not only linguistically expressible in Láadan – they are socially embraced.

The vocabulary is perhaps the only area of Láadan that can be argued is successfully engineered for female expression. Just as Klingon has words for “thrusters” and “transmit data,” Láadan has words that Elgin assumed are necessary for women, such as *elodá* (housewife), *idon*

¹ A full online dictionary of Láadan is available at <http://www.laadanlanguage.org/node/5> (see Elgin and Powers, “Láadan to English Dictionary” in the Works Cited), and matches each word with its creator. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a great deal of the fan-made vocabulary revolves around female liberation and sexuality, adding words such as *wírabanenath* (abortion), *anahelilith* (feminist angel), and *lol* (belonging, sisterhood). Note: Láadan *lol* has no a posteriori connection to the word “rose.”

(brush hair, as opposed to *enid*: to brush something other than hair), *rayide* (anorexia), and countless words referring to assorted cooking ingredients and kitchen appliances. Concepts for which English has a single word can be expressed with far greater specificity in Láadan, which has three different words for “menopause,” five different kinds of “pregnancy,” seven ways to “menstruate” and eleven different root words for “love” (which can then be multiplied by over thirty different mutations).

But Láadan’s proudest virtue is its unorthodox vocabulary – single words that require a paragraph of explanation in English. These are words such as *doóledosh* (the pain or loss that comes as a relief by virtue of ending the anticipation of its coming, literally: finally-burden), *rathom* (one who lures another to trust and rely on her but has no intention of following through, literally: non-pillow), and *ramimelh* (to refrain from asking out of courtesy or kindness, literally: non-ask).

The single most feminist aspect of Láadan – which is also potentially the language’s most inconsistent grammatical feature – is the pronoun *be*. Elgin confusingly writes in the *Native Tongue* novels that the *be* pronoun is genderless, and in a correction to the second edition of the *Dictionary and Grammar* Elgin states that the third person *be* is neither male, nor female, nor neuter, but a separate concept for which English has no equivalent. Yet suspiciously, the third person *be* form is used in every single Láadan translation with the word “she,” whereas “he” is only ever referred to as *behid* (*be* with the masculine morpheme *-id*). The word *with* (person) is a root used in words such as *háawith* (child), *áwith* (baby), and *ewith* (anthropology), but *with* is also the word for “woman.” *Withid*, *háawithid*, *áwithid*, and *ewithid* mean “man,” “boy,” “baby boy,” and “study of males,” respectively. In all features of Láadan the female is normative and the male is deviant, the opposite of many natural languages. Though this may be the “feminist,” alternative to the masculine normative, replacing it with a feminine normative does not mend a problem, it merely exchanges one subjected gender for the other. Equality does not

mean that the oppressed and the oppressors take turns, but that they reach a fair and even compromise.

Works Cited

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Professor Commentary

Prof. Michael D. Gordin

Writing about constructed languages is hard. The biggest obstacle is overcoming your readers’ likely reactions: bemusement, incomprehension, mockery, tedium. And then there’s the actual content of the paper. These languages are known to almost nobody, and with very few exceptions (Esperanto, Klingon, Quenya) have amassed no scholarly literature. So you have to teach yourself how the language works, and you have to develop an argument about it without the reassuring foundation of Established Scholarship to push off from. Since your reader most likely will not know the language, you are going to have to teach it to him or her (or be?). For your pains, expect noogies.

In this essay on Suzette Elgin’s feminist constructed language Láadan, Kelly Rafey has possibled the impossible: she teaches you the language (well, enough of it to understand how it works), explains Elgin’s intentions, and formulates an argument about what the language was supposed to do, what it did well — mostly the vocabulary, which is the extract presented here — and what it did oh-so-poorly. Rafey writes with humor, but it is not mean-spirited, and it functions on several levels (for the conlang-cognoscenti, there’s a Volapük pun in the footnote). This makes you want to read more, not less, about Elgin’s project.

The argument presents a special challenge: most linguists make a point of not judging the languages they study (Albanian’s verbal system is wrong!; don’t the Bantu languages sound silly?). Yet Rafey does judge Láadan, and the gambit works. Elgin’s project can be evaluated on two axes: as a literary creation, and as an intervention in feminist politics. In both areas, it failed. Rafey tells us why, and the answer lies in the language itself.

Fellow Commentary

Lekha Kanchinadan

As Professor Gordin explains, Kelly Rafey is the first linguist in Láadan’s scholarly ballroom, and she takes on this challenge with aplomb. Although she’s working within the conventions of linguistics, her essay is valuable to students of writing across disciplines. *The Tortoise* chose to feature her paper as an example of **close-reading**, an essential tool for all scholars when it comes to analyzing evidence.

In these three pages of her essay, Kelly analyzes and argues for the overall weakness of Láadan’s vocabulary. She builds her argument by first zooming in on specific words and explaining their definitions and the patterns they represent. This is typical close reading: a ground-up approach to primary sources. By honing in on a short piece of text, a single image, or in this case, just several words, writers can make claims that extend beyond the evidence itself. When close reading, a writer argues that a piece of evidence is a *microcosm* which encapsulates the essential qualities of something larger.

Like any close-reading, Kelly grounds her argument for Láadan’s lexical shortcomings with a description of the material she is analyzing. In Kelly’s case, this first step presented a challenge: after all, how do you describe a vocabulary without simply providing a list of definitions? Kelly tackles this problem by boiling down the vocabulary to its most distinctive characteristics, and then giving a few specific words to illustrate each one. This strategy is

applicable to other close readings as well: if you’re going to describe something, it has to be obviously relevant to the thesis.

After describing important characteristics of the language, Kelly synthesizes these descriptions and puts in her two cents: although these characteristics are admirable, they demonstrate an overall weakness. Láadan’s feminist approach simply inverts the traditional oppressor-oppressed relationship, it doesn’t do away with it. As she says elegantly, though the feminine pronoun for *be*

“may be the “feminist,” alternative to the masculine normative, replacing it with a feminine normative does not mend a problem, it merely exchanges one subjected gender for the other. Equality does not mean that the oppressed and the oppressors take turns, but that they reach a fair and even compromise.”

Kelly could have lost her bearings on such a broad topic without other scholarly voices to guide her. Instead, she researched enthusiastically and let a close eye on her evidence give her grounding. Writing Center fellows often compare an essay to an hourglass—start broad, narrow down, and then broaden again. Although a research topic will present a wide expanse of material, analysis occurs on a minute, detailed scale. The writer then zooms back out, linking a basic description to an analysis of the presented primary source, eventually to a synthesis of these analyses to defend a larger claim. It’s a fine-grain skill that is applicable to all writers—in this excerpt, watch how Kelly masterfully uses it to tackle a bizarre, futuristic language.