

BOOK REVIEWS

KEITH KHAN-HARRIS, *The Babel Message. A Love Letter to Language* (Thriplow, UK: Icon Books, 2022)

At an ignorant first glance, multilingual warning messages are not exactly something one would give a second thought (humanly, if not philologically speaking). One would imagine that a short text stating the somewhat obvious dangers of a product (in this case, the tiny toy inside a Kinder Surprise Egg) would be one of the most banal forms of messages to smoothly and effortlessly migrate between one language and another (and another, and another). One would also imagine that the understandable desire to protect the small children of the world from inhaling or swallowing small objects is transmitted in a direct, clear, word-for-word way on a reasonable common ground for all cultures. Keith Khan-Harris rightfully disagrees.

In his own words, the author is “a man obsessed with something seemingly trivial – the warning message found inside Kinder Surprise eggs: *WARNING, read and keep: Toy not suitable for children under 3 years. Small parts might be swallowed or inhaled.*”¹ Apart from this highly important bit of trivia, he is also a sociologist and writer, a senior lecturer at Leo Baeck College, an associate lecturer and honorary fellow at Birkbeck College. His fields of interest cover a diverse array of subjects (from Jewish studies to metal music), but language appears to be one of the more deeply rooted ones – since early childhood, he had a love for languages he did not understand: “it became a matter of fierce pride to me that I could tell the difference between written Japanese and Chinese, that I could spot Turkish at twenty paces, that I knew ‘æ’ and ‘ø’ can never be found in Swedish.”²

The book is an in-depth exploration of the multi-faceted dimensions, of the possibilities of form and expression of the languages of the world, swivelling around the warning message inside the Kinder Surprise Egg, used more as an open field for an applied linguistic, cultural and socio-political analysis rather than a sterile case study. The structure contains four unequal parts and, separately, a dual introduction, an appendix and an index of

¹ See <https://kahn-harris.org/book/the-babel-message-a-love-letter-to-language/> (Accessed March 2022).

² Keith Khan-Harris, *The Babel Message. A Love Letter to Language* (Thriplow, UK: Icon Books, 2022), xxii.

languages. The volume (as a side note, one endearing physical detail about this edition is that its covers are the exact bright orange of the Kinder eggs, which *cannot* be a coincidence) opens with its own warning message, “WARNING, read and keep”, pointing out, on the one hand, that, while it contains the translations of the same message into dozens of languages, there may indeed be mistakes but, on the other hand, and even more interestingly, Keith Khan-Harris’ own warning message includes a short tale that may aid in understanding the structure of his present books as well: “The final chapter of my previous book began with a Hebrew epigraph. Even though I speak and read the language, at some point in the preparation of the proofs the letters were reversed by the non-Hebrew-speaking typesetter. It’s an easy mistake to make; Hebrew is written from right to left and including such a script in an English manuscript is asking for trouble.”³ Beside the biblical implications of the title of this book, the chapter that gives its title is at the very end – “Part 4: The Babel Message” –, perhaps as a wink at the right-to-left form in general. It does, however, raise the question of whether or not this was done on purpose (not in the sense that the book should literally be read from end to start, obviously, since it is mainly written in English and that would only lead to confused frustration) or as a gentle nod to the possibilities of inscribing a message.

The first part, “Set the controls for the heart of the Message”, lays the grounds for the dive into this world of languages contained *in an eggshell*. The Message (capitalized, meaning the warning message) is used to point out the volatility of language, appealing to Saussure’s argument of words referring to mental concepts of things, ‘signs’ as combinations of signifiers (sounds) and signified (concepts), as well as Derrida and Baudrillard’s take on the arbitrariness of the connection between the two. The wording of the Message is minimal and relies on the reader’s ability to fill in the gaps, using external rules – “The confidence of Ferrero that the Message is intelligible shows how far we rely on rules that were never explained to any of us. While we might be able to assume that the reader understands some aspects of the Message, there is much else that seems to rest on less solid ground.” In this chapter, the Message is paired with the Manuscript (also capitalized) – while the Message is rather self-explanatory, as the meaning(s) of the warning, the Manuscript refers to the small piece of paper that carries it and it contains “languages from six families (...), written in seven different scripts. Across the world, at least three and a half billion people are native speakers of at least one language found on the Manuscript. The least spoken is Estonian, with just over 1 million native speakers, and the most is Mandarin Chinese, where nearly 1 billion have command of the language.”⁴

³ Ibid., xiii.

⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

Seeing and hearing while maintaining a feeling of astonishment freed from the preconceptions and instincts instilled in us by higher education play a key role in our perception of languages we do not understand, especially if they look like nothing we have ever familiarized ourselves with. Thus, the second part of the book, “The multilingual Message” explores “a complementary perspective that revels in languages’ ‘surface’ features. This is an *aesthetic* approach that draws attention to how we might enjoy the experience of engaging with the sounds and written forms of languages. In particular, I am interested in the aesthetics of *the languages we do not understand*.”⁵ To merely give a few examples of the Message in forms that astound the non-speaking *viewers* (because they cannot be *readers*), the author reproduces it in Chinese, Japanese, Georgian, Arabic and Thai, accompanying the examples with the interpretations they could receive simply as visual artforms (all while keeping in mind that they are simply the warning messages inside Kinder Surprise eggs) – for instance, Chinese is “a little intimidating”, Japanese “adds a dose of anarchy to the intimidation,” Georgian bears an elegance “combined with a complete lack of clues as to how it is to be pronounced” and both Georgian and Arabic are “silky”, to different extents. Moving closer to the European languages, the diacritics come into play and make them no less punishing. Hungarian, for example, “always looks belligerent and proud” and the author notes the “emphatic nature of its warning,” while pressing on the fact that “While I might see Hungarian script as badass, a Hungarian will most likely see it as just writing,”⁶ which is surely valid for any native speaker of the other languages that visually vibrate differently for on-lookers.

Despite having announced the need for a ‘superficial’ view on the beauty of an unknown language, another need creeps in inevitably – a message requires decoding. Thus, a new issue arises: the Message, in its English form, slowly reveals its shortcomings and its forms of compensation and translational interpretation in its other forms. While carrying the same essence, the languages that display the warning message behave quite differently and this is the moment linguistic comparativism comes into play – Part two goes on to demonstrate that the Manuscript very well illustrates the multitude of studies that have shown that, despite the seemingly sterile and straight-forward nature of a message, no two translations are identical. Moreover, the selection of languages that display the warning message is quite telling: from the forms of the Message in the Romance languages and their more or less identical sibling-languages, to the historical influences of the fall of Yugoslavia, to the social and political contexts of dialects or minorities (one example would be that of the Uyghur people in the

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Ibid., 42.

province of Xinjiang – “to write the Message in Uyghur is to remind ourselves that Chinese is not the language of all citizens of China”⁷).

Part three is the longest of the four and its ambitions are stated at the end of the second part – keeping in mind that the basis of the Message is, in fact, a warning for parents not to let their small children injure themselves: “I want to test the limits of the constraining language of the Message and explore the boundaries between sense and nonsense, between control and its lack. I want to show how the Message is built on sand. It’s time to *liberate* the Message.”⁸ Thus, Part three, “Liberating the Message” takes on the task it set out to accomplish. At first, it fills in the gaps, having commissioned translations in an astonishing multitude of languages, from the somewhat overlooked European languages to languages such as Tagalog, Guarani, Afrikaans, Zulu, Sepedi, Amharic, Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Dzongkha and many more.

The exploration (or the liberation) dives into the seemingly bottomless barrel of possibilities of freeing the Message from its current constraints. One such form of liberation calls on the earliest form of warnings, which also came into being as a result of the need to protect children: the onomatopoeic “Yuck”, which, of course, translates to something along the lines of “you really should not put that in your mouth.” Other means of aiding the Message in its escape are sign language (coupled with QR codes that lead, for instance, to one clip in which the author attempts to use it and another to the its “correct” use), Sutton Sign Writing, English Braille, Sumerian (Akkadian) cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Coptic or Old Norse. These time-travelling messages have English equivalents that are naturally by no means identical to the standard Messages found today in the eggs.

By far the most exciting part of this book is its inevitable entry into the land of invented languages. The depiction of the Message into ‘conlangs’ (constructed languages) and ‘artlangs’ (conlangs created for artistic purposes) begins with Esperanto, the most widely-spoken, and goes further to Klingon, Mando’a and Dothraki, among others, showing that the possibilities of ‘moving’ a fairly simple warning message into such languages is strongly linked to the nature of their cultures – the nuances that match only approximately or the absence of certain terms altogether, since a certain people have no need for them (for instance, the Message in Dothraki uses ‘babies’ instead of ‘children’ because children over the age of two are allowed to use weapons and therefore need no such warning). Part three goes on to show many other different invented languages, as well as the hardships endured by the author while navigating this volatile terrain.

⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸ Ibid., 102.

The peak of part three could definitely be the author's standing-ovation-deserving endeavour of *creating* his own language: *Altabaš*. The detailed description of the entire process represents a rare insight into the atrociously and painstakingly difficult task that employs much more than linguistic skills. The chapter ends on a most encouraging note: "The ultimate success of my own Message would be if it were liberated to the point of nonexistence. Why not start this process off? I invite the reader to come up with a name for this language using the principles I have set out during this chapter. It could translate to 'the language' or 'the Message language' or 'the lazy language' or 'the incompetent language' – you have all the ingredients to generate these words from randomly generated roots."⁹

The final part that also gives the books its title addresses, among other things, the "remorseless rise of English as a global language," the possibility of a minimal form of the Message that would require the lowest possible level of vocabulary and grammar comprehension, the pluses and minuses of translation engines that sometimes regurgitate hilarious utter nonsense and the relationship between language and conflict. The Appendix comes with a somewhat intimidating warning – "For true Manuscript fans only" and it is indeed addressed to that, listing and analysing the details of the Manuscript.

The Babel Message is truly a brilliant love letter to language and (dare I say) to language lovers everywhere, which from beginning to end, dives deeper and deeper into the intricacies of the mechanisms, behaviours, quirks and absolutely fascinating mysteries of our forms of expression, all while keeping the warning message inside the Kinder Surprise egg at its core. The Message is the noble nucleus of a light-hearted incursion into some of the most complicated issues out there – noble because, after all, human lives are at stake and everyone could agree that chocking to death as a consequence of not understanding the warning would indeed be less than desirable. The book continuously makes its reader ask "So what does it mean to love a text?", even more so in instances in which its language is unknown to them and the text therefore does everything in its power to resist their affections.

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⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.