
Logla takna mi

LEWIS JONES

Is the ultimate logical language still being used – somewhere out there?

IF YOU KNOW what the title of this article means, what follows is probably not going to be news to you. If you don't, you might be curious about the language in question, which certainly isn't English, but isn't a foreign language either.

'At the beginning of the Christmas holidays, 1955, I sat down before a bright fire to commence what I hoped would be a short paper on the possibility of testing the social psychological implications of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.' So wrote James Cooke Brown, a social psychologist at the University of Florida. 'I meant to proceed by showing that the construction of a tiny model language, with a grammar borrowed from the rules of modern logic, taught to subjects of different nationalities, in a laboratory setting, under conditions of control, would permit a decisive test.'

Following from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that people's thinking is controlled by the language they speak, Brown set out to create an 'entirely logical language,' as a result of which Loglan 'as a hyperlogical, or thought-facilitating language had a very natural birth'. However, to think of Loglan as yet another would-be international language is to misconceive its purpose: It is not so much another Esperanto or Interglossa as a spoken form of symbolic logic whose aim is almost total freedom from ambiguity. 'In Loglan,' Brown notes, 'one is forced to be clear.' Indeed, he saw it as in fact 'a laboratory instrument'.

Unlike English, its spelling is strictly phonemic, and 'no matter how swiftly spoken, any string of Loglan sounds will automatically resolve into a unique string of separate words'.

In order to be as accessible as possible, its sounds and word roots were drawn from the eight most widely spoken languages of the world: English, Spanish, Russian, French, Ger-

man, Hindi, Japanese, and Mandarin Chinese. At the time, native and secondary speakers of these eight target languages composed nearly 80 per cent of the earth's population, and the claim was that the average recognisability score of a Loglan composite word over this immense target population is 45 per cent.

Only two letters in the Loglan alphabet need explanation to English speakers: that is, *c* is always pronounced *sh* (as in *she*), and *j* is always pronounced as in French (cf. the *j* of *jardin* and the *zh*-sound in English *measure*). Structure words (such as *the* and *of*) all have the syllabic form (C)V(V), as with *e* ('and'), *ia* ('yes'), *le* ('the'), and *sui* ('also'), while predicate words have the form C—CV, as with *fumna* ('woman'), *mrenu* ('man'), and *blanu* ('blue').

Da, de, di are used in turn within a sentence for the persons or things you are talking about. *Da madzo* ('X makes [something]'), *Da madzo de* ('X makes Y'), and *Da madzo de di* ('X makes Y out of Z').

The verb *to be* is rarely needed and Loglan has no genders, as a result of which a pronoun such as *da* could mean *he, she*, or some indeterminate *X*, as in mathematics: hence, *da blanu* means 'He or she or it or something-or-other (is) blue.'

LEWIS JONES graduated in Modern Languages at Cambridge University. He wrote radio drama and short stories for the BBC, then spent ten years as an educational broadcaster in Singapore. On return to the UK, he scripted science programmes for BBC Schools Broadcasting, and was series editor for the Collins English Library of graded readers for students of English. He now writes a regular column for 'Skeptical Briefs', the newsletter of the American periodical 'Skeptical Inquirer'.

Basic tenses are taken care of by the three little words *pa*, *na*, and *fa*: *Da pa blanu* ('It was blue'), *Da na blanu* ('It is now blue'), *Da fa blanu* ('It will be blue').

Loglan treats indeterminate subjects ('somebody or other') by using *ba* in a way that will be familiar to anyone used to symbolic logic. *Ba mrenu e pa kamla* = 'Some X is a man and came.' *Ba* is also useful when you want to avoid being too specific: *Da pa madzo ba de* ('He made something-or-other out of it').

However, Loglan comes into its own when teasing out possible ambiguities. Thus, in *Da no pa gudbi mrenu* ('X was not a good man'), the *Da* or X could have been a bad woman or a good butterfly, because here *no* covers the whole predicate expression. In *Da pa no gudbi mrenu* ('X was a non-good man'), X was certainly a man, but not a good one.

Three kinds of abstraction are distinguished by special markers: *pu* ('the property of being something'), *po* ('an event or the state of something'), and *zo* ('an amount of being something'), as in:

Da pu de gudbi di 'X is the property of Y's being better than W'

Da po de mrenu 'X is Y's manhood'

Da zo de blanu 'X is the amount of blue'

In English, there are seventeen different meanings of the sentence 'It's a pretty little girls' school.' Here, Loglan teases out the alternatives with the help of the operator *ge*, which groups together what follows it into one modified term. In the following four examples, the word *bilti* means 'beautiful', *cmalo* means 'small', *nirli* means 'girl', and *ckela* means 'school':

Da bilti cmalo nirli ckela

'X is a beautifully small girls' school'

(i.e., a school for girls who are beautifully small)

Da bilti ge cmalo nirli ckela

'X is beautiful for a small girls' school'

Da bilti cmalo ge nirli ckela

'X is beautifully small for a girls' school'

Da bilti ge cmalo ge nirli ckela

'X is beautiful for a small (type of) girls' school'

The little word *nu* switches the meanings of first and second terms of any predicate. One of its uses (but not the only one) is to convert active to passive:

Da pa vedma de di 'X sold Y to W'

Da pa nu vedma de di 'X was sold by Y to W'

The Loglan word for *and* is *e*: hence *Da corta e sadji* ('He's short and wise'). No problems there, because someone can be both short and wise at the same time. But suppose you have what would be described in English as a red and blue ball. In Loglan, *Da redro e blanu* claims that it is red, and at the same time it is blue. However, in Loglan this would also raise the objection, 'Well, is it red or is it blue? Make up your mind.' In fact, the ball would probably have red patches and blue patches, and so Loglan takes care of this distinction by the use of the operator *ze*, to form a mixed predicate: *Da redro ze blanu* ('It is [mixed] red-and-blue').

English pronouns such as *we* are notoriously ambiguous. In Loglan, *mu* (*we*) is an obvious compound of *mi* ('I/me') and *tu* ('you'). But in case you want to imply 'myself and someone else,' the term *mia* is available – an abbreviation of *mi ze da* ('X and I jointly'). Similarly, *tua*, from *tu ze da* ('you and X jointly').

Punctuation marks can also be spoken: *li* and *lu* are used for 'quote-unquote': *Li Christopher Columbus lu glico namci la Kristobal Kolon* ('Christopher Columbus is the English name of Cristobal Colon'). The little word *je* clips together two terms as if to hyphenate them: *Da pa gotso le vedma je le korma* ('X went to the seller-of-the-horse'). And *ei* acts as a query: *ei tu fa gotso* ('Are you going?').

Loglan also takes care of the distinction between symbolic logic's inclusive and exclusive *or*, as in:

Da gudbi mrenu a sadji farfu

'X is a good man or wise father (and possibly both)'

Gotso la Romas onoi la Paris

'Go to Rome or Paris (but not to both)'

However, just in case you think that everything in Loglan is compelled to come out in black and white, there are four different markers of conviction:

Ia Yes, I agree that ... is true

Io I think that is probably true

Ii Perhaps/Maybe it is true/It is possibly true

Iu Who knows?/I don't know whether that is true (or not)

There are also four degrees of obligation:

oa I (or you) must do this

- oe I (or you) should do this
- oi I (or you) may do this
- ou It doesn't matter whether you (or I) do this or not

And four degrees of intention:

- ai Yes, I certainly intend to do this
- ao Yes, I wish to do this
- ae Yes, I hope to do this
- au I don't care whether I do this or not

There are even markers for what Brown claims are 'at least four distinct meanings of the word, *therefore*, though it seems to me that some of these distinctions would have been difficult to keep clear during the free flow of speech' (and Loglan was always meant to be a spoken language).

It wasn't long before the Loglan approach broke the bounds of academia and began to appear in fiction, usually (perhaps unsurprisingly) sci-fi. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis got an airing in *The Languages of Pao* by Jack Vance, and Loglan itself was mentioned in Robert Heinlein's novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. In *The Troika Incident*, Jim Brown wrote about a society in which Loglan was spoken (under the name *Panlan*: 'All-language'). Robert Rimmer planned to have Loglan-speaking characters in one of his novels, and wrote to the Loglan Institute for help in making sure everyone spoke grammatically.

I would guess that most people who contacted the Loglan Institute did so for the same reason that I did – as a result of reading an article about it in the *Scientific American* in 1960. Apart from a grammar and a dictionary, the Institute published a number of issues of *The Loglanist: La Logentan – Journal of the Loglan*

Institute and all Loglanders. However, it wasn't all culture-free. In the April 1977 issue, a reader wrote: 'I strongly object to the addition of *kanfu* (*kanga fumna*, 'dog woman') (*TL* Vol 1, #1, p. 48) to the vocabulary of Loglan. I see no reason why a word which in English has been used to denigrate women who did not conform to "male" standards should be coined in Loglan.' (The editor apologised and withdrew the suggestion.)

I took the *Journal* for a year, and the Institute sent me the name and address of another Loglander in Italy with the idea of setting up a correspondence. I'm afraid I never took up the offer, as with nothing in common except the language itself, I could only see myself getting into the radio ham's line of communication: 'The weather here is fine. How is it over your way?'

Over the decades, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has taken a hammering from both psychologists and linguists, and I doubt whether anyone seriously entertains it any more. One of its best-known examples was that Eskimos' perception of snow must be very different from, say, the perception of Europeans and others, because their language has many different words for snow. Nowadays, this myth is usually referred to as 'the Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax'.

So when the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis died, did Loglan die with it? I ask because I have seen no references to it for many years. Is the whole thing now a piece of ancient history? Or is there a group out there somewhere, still pleading *Logla takna mi* – 'Talk to me in Loglan'? ■