

The Language Construction Kit. Mark Rosenfelder. Chicago: Yonagu Books, 2010. 292pp. \$14.95. ISBN 978-0-9844700-0-6. pb

Long available online, Mark Rosenfelder's guide to constructing languages has at last found its way into a print edition. Expanded, full of essential lists, tables, and recommended readings, and including a complete reference grammar of Rosenfelder's invented language Kebreni, the *Language Construction Kit* (henceforth *LCK*) is a unique and enormously welcome manual for anyone interested in conlangs, alternate-world contexts, and linguistics as a whole. *LCK* is to be praised for serving not only as a guide to crafting conlangs, but also as an introduction to language and languages; at 292 pages, it has been distilled from an enormous amount of knowledge and experience, more of which can be appreciated by visiting Rosenfelder's website at www.zompist.com. There, one can find numerous links, lists, and downloadable resources, as well as many more of Rosenfelder's own, elaborate creations.

The sections of *LCK* move through their subject in as elementary an order as possible, beginning with the raw science of sounds, word-building, and grammar before moving into the more abstract areas of semantics and pragmatics. Of these, pragmatics is perhaps the most bewildering, being, as Rosenfelder describes, "something of the trash bin of linguistics" (129)—representing those aspects of language use that are the most difficult to circumscribe formally, and yet are essential to even the most basic real-world utterances and exchanges. They include issues such as deixis (contextual relativity), implicature (tacit forms of meaning), politeness, and real-world knowledge, all of which must be taken into account if the invented language's fictional speakers are from a world unlike our own. A section is then dedicated to language families, which poses the weightiest technical consideration for language creators. Coming up with a tongue that is both original and functional may sound intensive enough, but for those who wish to establish truly credible linguistic landscapes, Rosenfelder recommends creating whole groups of languages with dialects, sisters, and a history of interaction. Whether one invents these languages laterally, works forward from a proto-language, or (as Rosenfelder discourages) reconstructs ancestral forms, this section of *LCK* addresses primarily the issue of sound change—the phenomenon that, for example, in part caused an ancestral language of English to become as diversified as Irish, Armenian, and Sanskrit (students of Old English and other early Germanic languages will recall Verner's Law and Grimm's Law). It is not until one considers the complexity of sound change that one truly comes to appreciate the depth of J.R.R. Tolkien's Elvish languages, not to mention the ingenuity of philologists in establishing relationships among the attested languages of our own world. Whereas Tolkien had to apply his sound changes manually, however, Rosenfelder's *Sound Change Applier* computer application can be downloaded from zompist.com. It takes a bit of patience getting used to—and likely much more to master—but much of the section on language families in *LCK* is dedicated to explaining how it works. With it, one can apply sound changes to the entire lexicon of an invented language in moments.

Addressed last of all before the sample grammar of Kebreni is the area of writing systems. Its position emphasizes Rosenfelder's recommendation that constructed languages first be conceived in terms of sounds and mechanics, and only then subjected to the relatively artificial technology of writing. Several major sorts of systems are outlined, including logographs, syllabaries, and true alphabets, preceded by an introduction urging care for matters of media (the materials with which the language is written out), direction of the text, fonts, and the various idiosyncrasies of certain scripts. The 51-page grammar of Kebreni which follows

outlines the sort of language a dedicated student of *LCK* should eventually be capable of producing. Its features are treated largely in the same order as the sections of the book, with Rosenfelder's additional comments indented throughout. The grammar is followed up by a piece of extended prose (grammatically parsed), a list of historical sound changes separating Kebreni from an ancestral form, and a lexicon. After the section on Kebreni, *LCK* concludes with an enormously useful collection of wordlists for creating lexicons, an annotated reading list, a detailed index, and a reproduction of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Despite seeming hectic at times, *LCK* is a pleasure to read and consult. Rosenfelder's breezy familiarity with his material makes his writing facile without sacrificing information. He knows the conventions of conlanging, and is able to discourage the most tired and faulty of them without pontificating. On inventing alphabets, for example, he advises his readers to

“[k]eep the letters looking distinct. The best alphabets spread out over the conceptual graphic space, so that letters can't be confused for one another. Tolkien [Tengwar] is a bad example here: the elves must have been tormented by dyslexia.” (198)

Tolkien's languages take the brunt of Rosenfelder's criticism several times, primarily because—as fantasy archetypes—they are so often imitated. It is here as well where *LCK* is most special—not with its patient explanation of terminology nor its infectious enthusiasm, but rather with its constant appeal to the insight and innovation of language inventors.

The presence of constructed languages in the worlds of science fiction and fantasy—once as rare as the training required to invent them well—has now become somewhat standard. Where professional linguists are now commissioned to devise the alien tongues heard in such worlds as those of *Star Trek*, and, most recently, James Cameron's *Avatar* (not to mention the *Lord of the Rings* films, for which David Salo was hired to extrapolate new vocabularies from Tolkien's pre-existing corpus), the absence of moderately developed languages in alternate worlds is something writers can no longer get away with. Though there may only be occasional fragments—such as the Dothraki language of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series—the presence of or at least potential for formal grammaticality is now essential to secondary belief. Ursula K. LeGuin's works—with their frequent emphasis on the meanings and power of invented words—seemed relatively hollow once LeGuin admitted she is not a linguist, and that there is no point, for instance, in trying to formalize Hardic and the True Speech of her *Earthsea* series. That being so, the “Standard Fantasy Language,” as Rosenfelder calls it (17, 44), has also become somewhat hackneyed. Versions of and variations on Elvish, Dwarvish, and Black Speech are now a dime a dozen, to the extent that some fantasy writers—J.K. Rowling and Susanna Clarke, for example—simply use Latin for their otherworldly lingo.

Rosenfelder challenges this stagnant state of affairs by urging his readers to put themselves constantly in the minds and bodies of their invented language's speakers, and to allow that perspective to influence the way the conlang is devised. It has been common in both sci-fi and fantasy, for example, to represent non-human speech simply with a lot of gutturals and consonant clusters; *LCK*, however, urges inventors to consider the effects of alien speech organs, and to imagine sounds humans simply cannot reproduce (48-9). The Kebreni counting system, meanwhile, is based on a race with “only four toes per foot; as most counting systems are based on counting on the fingers and feet, this easily suggests a base 18 system” (226). As Roger D. Woodard observes in the introduction to the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages*, “if there was a time when human language was characterized by features and strategies fundamentally unlike those we presently know, it was a time prior to the development

of any attested or reconstructed language of antiquity.” Rosenfelder seems to understand this implicitly, and urges those in search of original language forms to try to invent them from inside the imagination.

It is difficult to find fault with *LCK*, if only because it is a one-of-a-kind book. If there is anything unfortunate about it, the problem lies not with the author, but with the hobby’s incongruity with its own genre. For the most part, conlangs seem the interest of technicians rather than literati—more scientists than poets. This means, among other things, that the best conlangs are more likely to remain in their inventors’ laboratories than ever to find themselves showcased by the fiction of a real-world language.

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