

Lovely Language Geekdom

written by Holly

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I'm up to 44 print-ready pages on the Language Clinic, and I'm not even halfway. The **Language-Building Clinic** was supposed to be a single chapter in the **Worldbuilding Clinic** book, but it's expanding wildly.

Here's a snippet from today's work.

The English Issue, From the Language Builder's Perspective

The problem with having English as your first language, from the language builder's perspective, is that English is a language that never met a word it didn't like.

It got its birth as the Norman soldier's attempt to pick up Anglo-Saxon barmaids, and the Norman tongue had been pretty promiscuous even before that. It started out when Roman Latin kept illicit company with Germanic nouns and African adjectives and Greek verbs and a whole lot more, kept a little of this, a bit of that, and some of everything else, squeezed the whole mess into mostly-regular Latin grammar, bred like mad, and then tore across western Europe spreading civilization and what would become all the Romance languages—Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and so on—before falling into disarray and disuse.

Centuries passed, while its clan of offspring shifted and evolved.

Then Latin's child Old French, carried by invading Normans, met my blue-painted intransigent Germanic-speaking Anglo-

Saxon ancestor horde, and in the crash, all of Latin's beautiful, logical rules broke, and Normans with their squishy Latinate multi-syllable soft sounds careened into rough-edged Celts and the advent of four-letter words that only had four letters.

Since then, English, the bastard child of frequent and messy cultural collisions, has gone on to add words from every other language on the planet that ever had an idea it didn't already contain. It has freely coined words when its speakers came up with concepts for which there were no words. It has cheerfully embraced, and then co-opted, and frequently mangled, the grammars and vocabularies of other places and peoples, under the absolute certainty that even though there were already a hundred ways to say "Dinner was great," having a hundred and one ways would be better.

English speakers have never accepted the limitations of the language. They have always just built more language to accommodate their needs, and then encouraged everyone else to jump onboard. Think Silicon Valley and the explosion of techie terms as a recent example of this. English goes anywhere and does anything, never takes No! for an answer, and even though it's a beast to learn well, can be picked up in a workable basic form by just about anyone, anywhere, using tons of words new speakers already know (because English raided their language for vocabulary a century or five ago.)

Every rule in English has an exception, or half a dozen of them, every part of speech has sections that have been tacked on like body parts to Frankenstein's monster, and everything you can say one way, you can say at least a dozen other ways, and probably closer to a hundred.

Because of this, English speakers (and therefore English-speaking language builders) have built into their subconscious minds this inherent linguistic sense that

anything is possible, that the language rules are really just general guidelines, that such rules as exist are mostly made to be broken, and that these rules certainly need not apply to them if they donâ€™t want them to.

Pause here for a moment. Consider what I said at the beginning of this course about a language being the soul of its people.

See what I mean?

There's considerably more, but I thought this bit was fun.

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