LÁADAN I EDAN - LÁADAN AND LINGUISTICS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGE LÁADAN THROUGH A FEMINIST LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Second wave feminism manifested in most things social and cultural. One of the domains fiercely debated was that of language, bringing into conversation the ways in which language is used to condition or even suppress one segment of the population or another. The intersection of two academic phenomena, namely the resurgence of the interest in the linguistic relativity theory and a peak in the social movement for women's equality, became fertile ground for a new type of conversation as well as artistic expression of the topics investigated under the academic microscope. Among these expressions, science fiction author and linguist constructed a language meant to express the perceptions and life experience of women, Láadan. As a fictional mirror of reality, as literature often finds itself to be, the universe she created follows a small group of women as they create this language. Initially only women speak it for the majority of the story spanning a trilogy, but it is not designed exclusively for women as some men eventually learn it as well. This paper will briefly analyze the language and attempt to understand the thought experiment its author, Suzette Haden Elgin, proposes with the creation of Láadan and the universe to which it belongs.

Keywords: constructed languages, science fiction, linguistics, feminism, cultural studies

The spark kindled by Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, lit conversations in all walks of life as women started questioning not only gender roles and equal pay, but also asserting autonomy over their own bodies, life choices, sexual partners, and the very fabric of society and language. Women in the academia started re-asserting their position and asking for the end of intellectual discrimination all the while questioning its authority, its motives and its position towards women. One line of inquiry brought under the microscope was the very language systems and their adequacy. These scholars felt that they did not have the adequate vocabulary to express their perceptions and more, that they were forced into using or not using certain terms by a system which did not have their personal interests at heart, that this system used default masculine experiences, pronouns, views and imposed them on women. Standing at the schism point between transformational grammar and generative semantics and at the heart of these social movements, professor Robin Lakoff, a trained linguist, remembers in the introduction of the 2004 reprint of her *Language and Woman's Place*:

> "The women's movement first exploded taboos, speaking the unspeakable, thinking the unthinkable, occasionally even doing the undoable. [...] It was recognized early that language was important, that there were consequences when grown women were "girls" and when the masculine pronoun was "normal" to refer to everybody [...] So generative semantics and the women's movement had similarly revolutionary origins and a similar need to question and subvert established beliefs." (17)

This is how the question of gender in language and society was seriously brought into focus and academically debated on all its facets. With this new generation of academics the conversation gained momentum and started receiving proper and singular attention in regards to the social impact a gendered linguistic system (overt or traditionally implicit) has. Extremely difficult to quantify, this type of research met with resistance and criticism, yet in

trying to answer these questions, other linguists, authors and academics from related or interconnected fields picked up the challenge and within a decade changed the worldview, or at least shook it enough that academics today still engage in in depth studies in the field. Such is the transformative power of language.

In going as far as questioning a vocabulary of one's own, feminists were able to move the conversation from the usual symptoms identified in every day life to the actual issue which, as they prove, is much deeper and connected to the very fabric of society, rooted in the very language one uses. Bringing to light this problem they could then put it up for debate and truly search for a meaning and a solution. They could now look for what had been identified as a "the problem that has no name" by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. This sense of almost an esoteric nature applied to women, whose ways and experience were cataloged as mysterious, and therefore beyond the scope and understanding of men has less to do with a romanticized version of womanhood, and much more to do with the inadequacy of their circumstances. Otherwise put, as Friedan herself states, they "simply did not fit the image of the modern American woman as she was written about in women's magazines, studied and analyzed in classrooms and clinics, praised and damned in a ceaseless barrage of words" (1), which eventually leads to her "[wondering] if other women faced this schizophrenic split" (Friedan, 1) stemming from an inability to conform to that which had been presented to them as their ideal version of reality. By extrapolation, one could argue that this inability to give a proper contour to the condition of the educated, middle-class, quite privileged American woman could be attributed to a limitation simultaneously in society, as well as in language. Both of these poles would inherently inhibit the natural evolution of the woman, constricting and crippling her. Thus, the invaluable contribution of linguistic relativism and feminist linguistics cannot be overstated, nor can it be denied.

On this cultural and academic background, combining both the Sapir-Whorf legacy, and this history in the making, coming from fellow feminists of her time, Suzette Haden Elgin (acronymed as SHE for most of the rest of the paper) decided to use science fiction and put together a world and a language in which to test several hypotheses at the same time, while also testing the readership and their response. These hypotheses, as SHE states in the introduction to *The First Dictionary and Grammar of Láadan*, "fell together" from a number of sources (Elgin, *Dictionary* 3). By this point she had already published several sci-fi short stories and novels, and was accustomed to sci-fi as her medium of choice. At the same time, in her work as a linguist she had encountered and had become familiarized with the relativity theory, to the point that she identified as a "self proclaimed whorfian" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 3). In addition to these starting points, she states that:

> "in the fall of 1981 I was involved in several seemingly unrelated activities, I was asked to write a scholarly review of the book *Women and Men Speaking*, by Cheris Kramarae; I was working on a speech for the WisCon science fiction convention scheduled for March 1982, where I was to be the Guest of Honor; and I was reading - and re-reading - Douglas Hofstadter's *Göedel, Escher, Bach"* (Elgin, *Dictionary* 3)

The first of these the four main hypotheses for the *Native Tongue* trilogy and for the construction of Láadan, was born. Cheris Kramarae was one of the women analyzing the social, cultural and linguistic aspects of a patriarchal system in natural languages, through her exploration of the "muted group theory" (Elgin, *Women and Men Speaking: Review* 940). Kramarae's book exposes Elgin to the concept that "human languages are inadequate to express the perceptions of women" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 3). On the one hand a plan for a "problem with no name", described by Friedan in her seminal work cannot be fathomed or adequately formulated, given the limitation and seemingly insufficient quality of the language, in its mid-20th century form. However, vocabulary can only be formed if one talks

about the problem. Thus the answer to this paradox is found within the paradox itself. By talking about the issue at hand one can create new vocabulary tailored for the problem, then weed out the inadequate parts until a proper form makes its way in one's consciousness in order to fully express the issue and further, into one's own society.

The second hypothesis explored by Elgin comes from her interest in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. In short, this theory, also called the linguistic relativity theory, holds that language influences its culture and the worldview of its speakers. Based on the weak form, SHE is interested in the way reality would look like if it were shaped by a woman's language. In her fictional universe, the difference between a woman's reality and a man's is made quite clear. Even though women live in a reality created and enforced by men, some, the protagonists, still retain their individuality and crave for something of their own, something that cannot yet be fully uttered. Slowly, with the help of the new language they themselves create, their reality changes, to the point that they no longer engage with men in a tug-of-war type of struggle, but live in their own reality which ultimately brings with it liberation. The third, SHE says, comes from Hofstadter's book in which he "proposed that for every record player there were records it could not play because they would lead to its indirect self-destruction" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 4). This inspired her to extrapolate and posit that "for every culture there are languages it could not use because they would lead to its indirect self-destruction" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 4). With this in mind she wanted to see if indeed American culture would suffer or change in any way if women spoke their own language. Indeed, in *Native Tongue* the overall American culture stays the same but towards the end of the novel it starts changing in a small group, with ripples larger and larger in the following two books of the trilogy. In this respect the books and the way language is treated in their universe is the perfect depiction of a grassroots movement which becomes unstoppable. The final hypothesis started from the way in which sci-fi women writers approach womanhood in their literary works. The most predominant trends, SHE observes, are in relation to men: "women portraying new realities in science fiction had, so far as I knew, dealt only with Matriarchy and Androgyny, and never with a third alternative based on the hypothesis that women are not superior to men (Matriarchy) or interchangeable with and equal to men (Androgyny) but rather entirely different from men" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 4). Again, connected to language, this third option may not be possible due to the lack of a lexical framework encouraging its exploration. Thus she endeavors to create it by adding to the already existent conversation which was crystalizing as a the feminist linguistics domain, in a very unique way, that of a constructed language, Láadan. The following section of the article will offer a general context of the fictional world in which Láadan is created and a brief analysis of some of its key features relevant to the conversation at hand.

Suzette Haden Elgin, by her full name and title Patricia Anne Suzette Wilkins Elgin, PhD, was an American linguist, writer and professor. SHE wrote poetry, non-fiction, and science fiction, all related to or in close communion with her favorite field of study, linguistics (Clute & Nicholls 374). *Native Tongue* is the first book in a trilogy by the same name, which also includes *Judas Rose* and *Earthsong*, dealing with a dystopian society in which women fight for liberation solely through the use of language. The central stage is taken by a group of linguist women who build tight-knit relationships among themselves and in doing so build a different type of resistance. Through an immense exercise of patience and effort during several decades they create a language intended as a non-violent way to resist oppression and exact social change.

The setting is on Earth, in the United States of America starting with the year 2179 onward. The first chapter opens with a fictional amendment to the US Constitution dating from the year 1991 serving as an epigraph. Its text makes it clear that the 2179 American society lives in a world where the congress of 1991 revoked the 19th amendment and

effectively removed all rights and liberties of women from that point on, subordinating them to the guardianship of their male relatives and legally transforming them into minors. Women no longer have the right to vote, to hold office, to engage in any scholarly activity, to work any jobs without the permission of their male guardian, or if no guardian is alive, the state department. They cannot own property, they cannot have money of their own except for a minimum amount of "pocket money". All this, the amendment attributes to the "natural limitations" of women which endanger the progress and safety of the United States as a nation (Elgin, *Native Tongue* 7). In short, even though the setting is a futuristic one, America reverts back to pre-Seneca Falls lawmaking and standards of living with some improvements, technological advancement and alien contact. The only group of women with somewhat of a different status, insofar as they are allowed to work "a man's job" as an exception, are the women belonging to the Linguist Households, although solely out of necessity, as the Linguists are an elite group at the forefront of alien contact interpreting and helping humanity. The contact with alien had been so abrupt and the demand for professional interpreters so large that a separate division had to be created, the Linguists' Lines and even so men need the help of women. They however do not receive special treatment other than being allowed to work and engage in intellectual activities and like all women working in other woman-suited fields such as nurses, do not receive payment, the money earned being sent to the man in charge. This however gives them the tools they need to create the language which would eventually help them break through oppression towards liberation.

The background is necessary to understand certain features that Elgin imbued in the real language Láadan, for which she published a *First Grammar and Dictionary* in 1985, one year after the publication of *Native Tongue.* The language carries over the story of these oppressed women, their desire for self expression and their vision of what form the fight for liberation should be take, as well as Elgin's own, as she labels the creation of both the language and the universe a thought experiment.

In both the fictional universe and the non-fictional one, Láadan is a language designed to express the perceptions of women, as the name itself states it from the very beginning, *láa* meaning perception and *dan* language, thus *Láadan* means the language of perception. It is not a language exclusively for women, as the author points out on several occasions, but it is built with the experiences of women in mind, experiences which otherwise either cannot be found in English, or would require heavy paraphrasing. It is also not meant to replace any natural language, but merely to serve as a medium for expressing these perceptions left unsaid in natural languages. The value of such a feature in a language which will eventually be spoken by men is undeniable, as these men will not only be made aware of experiences which are otherwise either tabu or of no interest to them because of the patriarchal system in which they were brought up, but they will also find and cultivate the ability to empathize. In addition to this core goal around which the whole language revolves, Elgin thought of several other relevant aspects that would serve its purposes, namely its productivity, its regularity and not least, its accessibility, and the ease of learning. This is yet another example of what makes the language woman-oriented from its very conception. It specifically takes into consideration things that women value, as a woman perceives them, not as the societal or "patriarchal paradigm" would impose them. Most of these patchwork elements are a combination of the author's personal linguistic preference, her attention to women's needs and the accessibility of the language. We cannot omit mentioning the need of rectifying ambiguity within discourse, an element which may be found in many contexts:

> "[natural languages] lacked ways to express emotional information conveniently, so that — especially in English — much of that information had to be carried by body language and was almost entirely missing from written language. This characteristic (which makes English so well suited for business) left women

> vulnerable to hostile language followed by the ancient 'But all I said was…' excuse; and it restricted women to the largely useless 'It wasn't what you said, it was the way you said it!' defense against such hostility." ("Láadan, the Constructed Language")

Thus some mentions of a few such features will be necessary, and reference will be made to this specific intention without further explaining it everytime. This "lexicalization" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 152) of emotions is found in several grammatical choices. As with everything connected to this language, the intention behind this lexicalization is not to replace intonation and body language completely, basically the nuances that give any language its color, uniqueness and personality, but merely to enhance the degree of precision with which one makes oneself understood and avoid ambiguities as much as possible. Of course, they cannot be completely eluded, and "like any human language, Láadan has its own ambiguities" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 51). That however is not a flaw, it is what makes it merely human and moreover, desirable since it makes Elgin's effort relatable.

Without attempting to exhaust the linguistic features of what proves to be not only a functional language, but a complete one insofar as a language can be complete, to quote one of the protagonists of *Native Tongue,* Nazareth Chornyak, "no living language can ever be 'finished'" (Elgin, *Native Tongue* 245), a number will be analyzed below. A base set of phonemes, 5 vowels and 13 consonants were chosen, those the author found to be most common across the human languages she knew. To these, allotones for each vowels may appear in conditions explained below. These base sounds are: [ɑ], [ɛ], [ɪ], [o], [u], [b], [d], [ʃ], [m], [n], [l], [r], [w], [j], [θ], [ʒ] and [ɬ] (Elgin, *Dictionary* 12). Cluster consonants and vowels are not permitted in the same word but as a workaround when it comes to vowel clusters, one will receive a high tone, making the language a tonal one. If in creating new constructions by merger or affixations, two consonants or two vowels are found in proximity to one another, an extra sound must be added in between to avoid the cluster and that is the sound *h* in the case of vowels (Elgin, *Dictionary* 12), and a vowel in the the case of consonants which is *e* (idem 133). Thus *áya,* which is the singular form of "beautiful, to be beautiful", becomes *mehá́ya* in plural, where *me* is the plural marker (Elgin, *Dictionary* 12). Likewise, *Láadan* becomes *Láadaneth,* where *th* here is the direct object marker. One of the few exceptions for these clusters is when the tone appears. In certain double vowel formations (doubling the same vowel), one will always have an acute accent mark, which indicates that that vowel will be slightly more stressed than the other, thus the sounds are not the same, and the construction is permitted, not breaking the no cluster rule mentioned above. Some examples are *bíi*, a speech act marker indicating that the statement following it is declarative, *láa,* to perceive, *dóolon,* violin. The reason for such a choice speaks towards Elgin's view of both feminism and womanhood. As she explains it in the *Grammar* "one of the things that women do in their language behavior, in all of the languages I know, is a whole lot of body language work" (Elgin, *Grammar* 152). Thus she purposely chose these elements in an attempt to lexicalize such features and make them evident in the everyday use of the language and its musicality. The intended overall sound of Láadan is meant to be soft, wavy, having a flowing melody and no aggressive edges to it and very much in control of the speech act, which is very well mirrored by the actions of the women who create it in the trilogy. No steps they take towards liberation are aggressive, yet, no matter how tentative, nor are they uncertain. The importance of this tone is quite relevant in the language as a whole, playing an important role in its morphology as well. A good example may be seen in the evidence markers *wáa* and *waá*. Added to the end of a sentence, the former will indicate that the information provided is assumed true by the speaker because the speaker trusts the source. The latter on the other hand means the exact opposite, the information is assumed false due to mistrust (Elgin, *Dictionary* 124). This is one more of the several such features in Láadan which are built specifically to impress upon the speaker the hefty responsibility that comes with proper

communication, to make sure that the utterances cannot leave room for interpretation. Another one may be found in the basic sentence structure which is fixed to VSO plus two mandatory particles at the beginning and end of any sentence. These particles, called a speech act morpheme for the one at the beginning, and evidence morpheme for the end, are another feature designed to lexicalize statements otherwise left to the context outside of the speech act, such as body language. Examples of a sentences may be given as follows:

Bíi áya Láadan wa.

I declare / beautiful / Láadan / as I perceive it.

Láadan is beautiful.

"Bíi ril néde rul anath wáa."

I declare / now (present auxiliary, usually optional) / to want / cat / food (as object) / because the source is trusted (in this case the cat made it clear that food is needed)

"The cat wants food." ("Láadan Microgrammar")

Providing the word for word translation makes the structure and the intention clear. This structure of *speech act morpheme + verb + subject + object + evidence morpheme* is to be used for the vast majority of utterances.

In order to lexicalize certain emotions, a fixed set of suffixes for these speech acts were provided. The form above is the neutral and default one when no specific intention needs to be signaled, but each of the speech act morphemes can get any of the suffixes below to make the intention of the speaker clear and unambiguous:

"-d said in anger
-th said in pain
-li said in love
-lan said in celebration
-da said in jest, as a joke
-ya said in fear
-de said in narrative, as a story
-di said in teaching" (Elgin, *Dictionary* 132)

For instance, we could look at the following constructions:

"Bíi shóod le wa. (I'm busy.)
Bíid shóod le wa. (I-say-to-you-in-anger, I'm busy!)
Bíida shóod le wa. (I-say-to-you-in-jest, I'm busy!)"
("Láadan Made Easier")

Thus the verbal transmission of these intentions or feelings may be signaled in other instances in an attempt to include other types of perceptions namely visual and tactile in this case in the speech act (Elgin, *Dictionary* 39), affixation playing a major part in the entirety of Láadan grammar.

One other key feature of Láadan is that verbs and adjectives are always the same class. This peculiar aspect of the language brings an interesting change in perception if one thinks about the role of these parts of speech. While the verb shows action, movement, the adjective shows the quality. Thus in one word, Láadan does both as if to say that the attributes are always vibrant and evolving, never static. What is more, it establishes an intrinsic connection between one's actions and their nature, that which characterizes them, essentially drawing our attention to the impact actions have on our development, on the one hand, while also simultaneously accepting that who we are is oftentimes regarded as the root cause of our actions, staying true to the thread of linguistic relativity running throughout the books.

Finally, a mention must be made regarding the most interesting aspect of the language, and at the same time its very core and the idea with which Elgin started building it,

and that is words which express things that require entire phrases in English. This trait is prevalent in Indigenous languages such as Navajo, Inuit and Potawatomi. One example of such a word in Potawatomi is "*Puhpowee* [which] translates as 'the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight'" (Kimmerer 49). Indeed, oftentimes modern languages seem to be built for ease of communication and abstraction in the favor of certain nuances which these Indigenous languages are so rich in. Elgin aims to enrich that perception through Láadan in words like the following:

> "*widazhad* Pregnant late in the term of the pregnancy and eager for it to come to an end at long last.
>
> *rahéena* Non-heart-sibling; one so entirely incompatible with another that there is no hope of ever achieving any kind of understanding or anything more than a truce, and no hope of ever making such a one understand why; does not mean 'enemy.'
>
> *rathom* non-pillow; one who lures another to trust and rely on him or her but who has no intention of following through; a 'lean on me so I can step aside and let you fall' person.
>
> *hahodib* To be in a state of having deliberately shut off all feeling.
>
> *ramimelh* To refrain from asking, with evil intent; especially when it's clear that someone badly wants the other to ask.
>
> *radíidin* Nonholiday; a time allegedly a holiday but actually so much a burden because of work and preparations that it is a dreaded occasion; especially when there are too many guests and none of them help.
>
> *azhdadin* To menopause uneventfully.
>
> *bama* Anger which is not futile and which is for good reasons, but when there is no one on whom you can blame what you're angry about."
>
> (Elgin, *Language Imperative* 208 - 209)

There is no best suited comment on these and other such words which are clearly tailored for women's experiences as Elgin perceives them, than her own:

> "If you are a man, and your reaction to one or more of those [...]words is 'But surely nobody would ever want or need to talk about that!' that is precisely the point." (Elgin, *Language Imperative* 209)

Beyond all technical and stylistic merits of this language, as well as *Native Tongue*, there is one as difficult to quantify as Betty Friedan's "problem with no name". The fact that it brings into conversation the needs of roughly half of the population of the globe, needs that cannot be uttered and do not have words because they are not talked about is invaluable. These perceptions can only be understood if talked about in Láadan or in one's own native tongue, but the key element here is conversation and communication, and this is where Elgin joins her efforts to those of feminists worldwide, in attempting to create a precedent, a push out of a comfort zone which in reality is not comfortable, but which is perhaps accepted and endured as necessary to progress. Like Nazareth Chornyak, she urges her readers to stop finding reasons to postpone the change, and exact it, even if the future is unpredictable. To start small, in one's own real or metaphorical knitting circle, then expand. Not violently, not ostentatiously, but steady and methodically, scientifically even. As Nazareth writes in her diary, to light the fire upon the ice. Only then may the dominant be challenged, only then may the glass ceiling be broken. Láadan did not receive the attention other constructed languages at the time had. Women did not pick it up for use as an auxiliary language, or a language which would give them freedom of expression and the reasons behind why they did not can only be speculated about. Whether it is the universe which approaches its theme unlike the usual worldsaving action-packed novel, or the affinity for constructed languages which only a small percentage of people have, or the patience to learn a new and constructed language, is

not as important as the fact that this language and this universe exist and they bring a different perspective to a problem with which society today still struggles.

Even if the hypotheses on which it was based could not be tested due to the limited reception of the language, it is still an invaluable milestone in the efforts of those linguists, feminists and authors to search for a way to bring awareness. Further, its contribution stems from the treatment of linguistics as a science within the realm of science fiction that proved key in facilitating the advancement of the human race. In presenting it in such an artful manner, Elgin reiterates for the masses what other academics had previously done for only the select elite of intellectuals, namely that language and the way in which it is used can be tool that chisels the reality around us, and that, as language users, humans are endowed with the ability of constructing their very cultural contexts. Elgin does not propose that all women's experiences are the same and all their pleas universal. Through her art, SHE does invite to conversation, to a different kind of (r)evolution by asking women to (re)consider their place within their contexts and to find and create their own new languages or new vocabulary in their own native tongues if Láadan is not enough, because in the end, all that remains is the word, just as in the beginning all there was, was the word.

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