Nathan Gray - Yerkish Poems

grawböckler garage
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The three works on display here arise out of a research and performance project that investigates a constructed language, created in the 1970s that was intended for interspecies communication. Named Yerkish, the language uses graphic symbols to facilitate communication between primates of the Pan and Homo genera. Pan being the shared genus of the sub-species: chimps and bonobos, and Homo being the genus of humans.

The poems attempt to address an imagined audience of Yerkish users, their experiences and interests, as reflected in the limited vocabulary of the Yerkish lexigrams. The banners attempt to reconstruct and then deconstruct the original graphic design elements: design forensics gives way to design poetics.

The Experiment.

Having vastly different vocal tracts to humans meant that, by the 1950s, experiments designed to teach chimps and bonobos to speak had completely failed. Subsequent experiments intended to teach Pan genus apes sign language had fallen apart when it was found that researchers were inadvertently prompting the apes, giving them non-language cues. So the question of whether apes could be taught language remained open.

In the late 1970s these failures came to inform an experiment where a computer keyboard, using novel graphic symbols was introduced to a mixed group of chimps and bonobos. The lexigrams on the keyboard were not the writing of the language but the language itself, a graphic language called Yerkish. Pressing the keys was the equivalent of speaking (or signing) Yerkish.

The visual nature of Yerkish was intended to avoid the speech limitations of non-human primates and the use of a computer to judge valid sentence constructions avoided the tendency of human researchers to inadvertently prompt responses.

Yerkish Design

In the 1977 essay: "The Yerkish Grammar and its Automatic Parser", Ernst Von Glaserfeld laid out the simple, elegant design principles and grammar of the language. (see illustration 1.)

There was just one problem, the apes had no interest in using the keyboard, not until an infant, who happened to be accompanying his mother to the lessons, spontaneously started using the system demonstrating a far greater understanding than any of the older primates who had been intentionally taught the language. The infant's name was Kanzi.

The Pan / Homo Culture

Sue Savage Rumbaugh, the lead researcher on the project believed that language was a part of culture and impossible to study in isolation, she hypothesised that Kanzi had absorbed this language because he had been brought up in a new culture which used the language as its native tongue. Kanzi was the first native of this culture, a culture Savage Rumbaugh termed The Pan / Homo culture.

In the book "Kanzi's Primal Language - The Cultural Initiation of Primates into Language" Savage Rumbaugh says "the apes are allowed to affect us, just as we affect them: the emerging Pan/Homo culture is an intermediary form of life. Otherwise, there would be no talking with each other."

A Cultural Revolution

Cultural changes are often reflected in language and around this time Yerkish symbols cease to follow the elegant guidelines of Von Glaserfeld and instead become more improvised. My assumption is that the later lexigrams were quickly designed by the researchers themselves using MS Paint or MS Word, using rough abstract shapes and the default fonts: Comic Sans, Hobo and Krungthep. (see illustration 2)

Around this time the automatic parser, the grammar checking computer system was abandoned in favour of printed charts that could be pointed at. Reopening the experiments to the possibility of researchers unconsciously prompting the apes but this seems to have no longer been important, the lines between researcher and test subject were now blurred.

Pan Reality

Sue Savage Rumbaugh from "Kanzi's Primal Language….": "The intermediary Pan/Homo culture is the basically unplanned result of two species' mutual adaptations to each other. We consider writing the ethnography of this bi-species culture, for we too are enculturated in Pan reality and learn much from Kanzi, Panbanisha, Matata and the other bonobos."

Tellingly there is no word in Yerkish for human or ape and so no way for Yerkish users to differentiate along species lines. Researchers shared spaces, language and customs with the chimps and bonobos adapting their behaviours and negotiating decisions but negotiating power in ape societies is often attained through violence and after a series of accidents in which researchers were badly injured Sue Savage-Rumbaugh was removed from the project and the experiments were wound down.

Yerkish is now used in a limited way, through safety glass walls and the Pan / Homo culture is no more.

Illustration 1.

Early Yerkish lexigram design from "The Yerkish Grammar and its Automatic Parser",
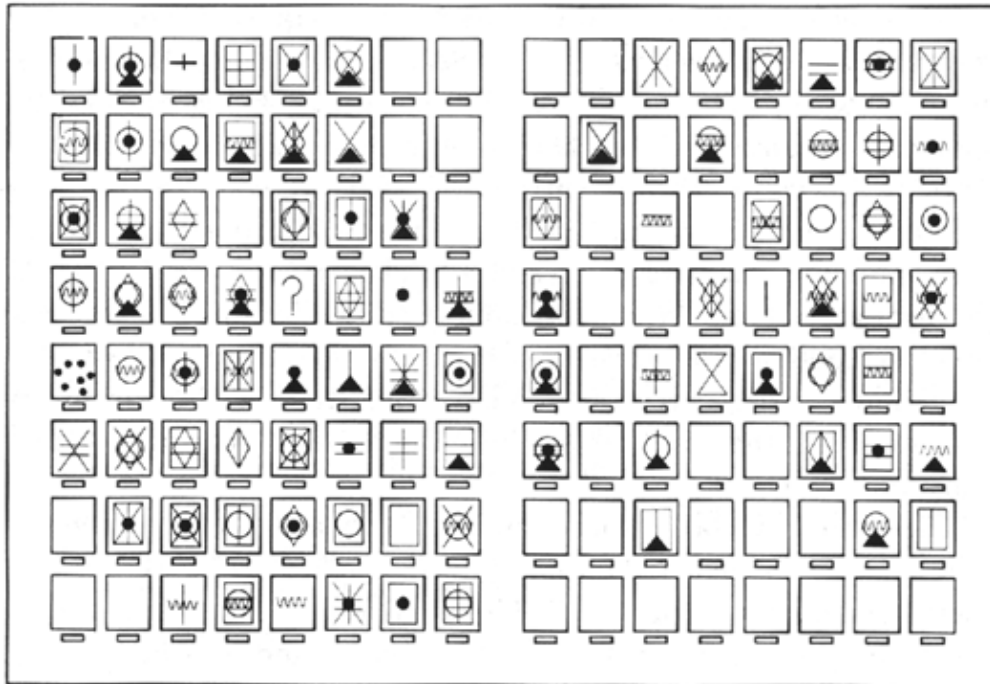Ernst Von Glaserfeld.

Figure 3.15. Sherman and Austin's keyboard, circa 1983.

Illustration 2.

A selection of later lexigrams, from the website of The Ape Initiative, 2016.