

[Explain: fictocritical piece that takes place in the world of a science-fiction novel I am writing?]

In spite of conflict with the Avians, the samples of extra-terrestrial responses to Simian messages provide decent matter with which to begin a reflection on translation strategies. As we know, the Avians claim to have been maintaining successful intercomprehension with the extra-terrestrials since approximately 1,000 BC in the Simian calendar, about 1,000 years after the start of the Avian exodus, exodus that began with the domestication of birds and continued well through the Simian middle ages.

Although the expression “translation strategies” will be used throughout the article, it is undoubtedly too ambitious for the findings presented, which would be better deemed a hypothesis for developing a strategy for comprehension. Indeed, the primary question remains: what kind of comprehension is possible here, if any, given the nature of our interpretation of the messages? Only by beginning to understand how the Extra-terrestrial language works, and even if it is to be considered a language in the Simian sense of the word, can we begin to try to decode it and perhaps someday to speak and be spoken to.

We will begin by presenting the extra-terrestrial messages received in response to the Simian ones transmitted through the intermediary of the Avians, along with an analysis of their structure and formation. As we shall see, Avian communication most likely presents the key to unlocking a translation strategy that will allow us to communicate directly with the extra-terrestrials without having to go through the undoubtedly suspect mediations of the Avians. Audrey Alm’s theory of Universal Rhetoric, stemming from George A Kennedy’s late 20<sup>th</sup> century work on animal rhetoric, proposes that although animals may not be said to have language in the Simian sense of the word, they do have rhetoric. Rhetoric, in Alm and Kennedy, precedes language, and is considered a kind of “energy”. The supposedly semantic and information driven nature of Simian languages actually impedes linguists, in Alm’s view, from seeing the true nature of how meaning is produced, namely performatively by the receiver in a transformation or translation of the originary raw material. Time permitting, we will relate this to Anna Gibb’s notion of “motherese”, to show that Simian communication is much closer to the Avian’s than it may appear.

As is by now common knowledge, the message I am about to play for you is far from the first. The delay in obtaining a response is in part no doubt due to Simian arrogance, as Avian interpreters advised frustrated Simian researchers that scientific and mathematic formulas, such as those contained in the Arecibo message (the numbers 1-10; the atomic numbers of the elements found in DNA etc.) would obtain no response from the extra-terrestrials. The extra-terrestrials, if the Avians are to be believed, respond to—and perhaps understand—only what roughly translates from Avian sign systems as “passion”. Of course the very notion of “passion” is an interspecies untranslatable—which, at least in this researcher’s humble opinion, is all the more reason to try to translate

it. After several messages carefully selected from the bibliography of Simian missives sent to Extra-terrestrials, our team sent out a simple message, authored and spoken by the present researcher-myself-whether out of desperation, frustration with Avian bemusement, or just because I didn't know what else to do. A query into why the following message received a response while neither Leon Theremin's nor the Beatles's "Across the Universe" did not, could potentially provide some insight, but remains beyond the scope of the present discussion.

The message I sent was,

"Hello, is anybody out there?". And the response:

[play recording - 19 seconds]

The first thing the casual listener will observe is that the sound of the voices in the response are the same as my own. It was obviously quite disconcerting to hear my own voice played back to me, but in a polyphonic chorus of seeming nonsense.

Nevertheless, I quickly realized that the message was not nonsense, if by nonsense we understand something syntactically irrelevant to its interlocutor. Indeed, using frequency extraction software, we were able to isolate each part, apparently sung by the same voice—a voice bearing the same timbre and frequency as my own. In this first recording we are able to recognize five parts, although as we shall see, this is not a constant. The number of parts varies in each response and appears to follow no apparent logic, although further data might offer more insight.

What we were able to conclude, is that the responses are far from randomly generated but rather consist in *modulations* of the original messages. The word "modulation" has been used in Translation Studies since the 1950's to refer to the change in perspective that can occur during the translation process. However, if we trace this word back to its origin in a musical lexicon, we know that "modulation" is also a change in register and sometimes therefore, in order. One modulates from one key to another.

Here the extra-terrestrial "phrase" is organized rhizomatically, and no one unit can be said to precede or follow another. Order and arrangement—or what we might call syntax—appears to happen in the way in which each individual target unit responds to and modulates the source unit.

[Play each part individually]

The [loʊ] corresponded to the second syllable in "Hello!"

but with a reversed intonation, low instead of high, and flat instead of varied.

The [i-zʌ] to the first part of “**Is anybody**”  
but higher, and punctuated

The [hɑ] to the very beginning of my utterance “**Hello!**”  
but with a slight modulation to the vowel tone, and differentiated,  
cut off from its initial quality of liaison with “lo”

The [nɪpəti-nɪpəti] was a transformation of the second part of “**anybody**”  
but again with a change in intonation. Instead of weak/strong/weak  
as in “nybody”, the accentuation went strong/weak/weak. The new  
intoned string was repeated twice in succession to make two triplets.  
There was thus a corresponding rhythmic, and melodic change.

The [ɑ ta- a ta- a ta], a deformation of “**out there?**”

But here, there is a veritable melodic invention that was not in the  
original at all, with the modulation to “out there?” repeated three times.  
There is also again minor change in phonology, the [r] elided to create a  
pure [ɑ] sound, linked in legato to the other phonemes in its part. Each  
[ɑ] in the series is different, but again, the melodic line as a whole is  
repeated in an automated series, six times.

When trying to interpret this message, even on such a basic level as  
unit differentiation and how the modulations to each unit are carried out,  
we must first ask the question of whether the message can be interpreted  
at all: whether it has a “meaning”, and whether meaning is necessary to  
the process of translation. In other words, we must wonder whether this  
falls into the definition of what we call a “language”, and therefore what  
is a language, and whether language is necessary for translation. Central  
to this is the role of information transmission, and the part that it plays in  
language. How much of language has information transmission as its  
role?

These interrogations prompted our next transmission, in the face of a  
certain fundamental absurdity—namely, if we can not understand them,  
what reasons could we have to assume that they can understand us? But  
as the first message was motivated out of an absurd desperation, we had  
reason to believe that a second of this nature might likewise be  
successful, and indeed, it was.

This is the response to our second transmission: “Are you speaking a  
language?”

[play recording]

So we get this time five parts, still in my own voice:

[ɑr jʌsp] : **Are you** speaking a language?

- rising melodic intonation (like a question?)
- each of the two “syllables” of relatively equal length

**['ik a]** : Are you **speaking** a language?

- three rapid rhythmic successions of the syntagm ['ik a] ['ik a] ['ik a], corresponding to one repetition of [aɪ jʌsp].

**[gɑ la]** : Are you **speaking a language?**

- falling melodic intonation (like a response?)
- placed at staggered intervals and twice as often as the [aɪ jʌsp] syntagm, but otherwise quite similar. At certain moments, **[gɑ la]** and [aɪ jʌsp], might even be said to harmonize.

~~**[gʷeɪndz]** : Are you speaking a language?~~ pa pa pa (aspirated)

- Falling intonation, set at an interval of an octave.
- Follows [aɪ jʌsp], set in-between their reoccurrences.
- Vibrated voice quality, almost animalistic, or as though gargled at the back of the throat.

It was after this second transmission that Jennifer K Dick, another member of our team proposed her “anticipated response procedure”. To sum up briefly for those of you who were not present at yesterday’s panel, she proposed we ask questions we already knew the answer to, and from there posit an informational equivalence between what we knew to be the answer and the response received from the extra-terrestrials:

We began by informing the extra-terrestrials of our methods:

This is the response we received to our first non-interrogatory based communication, implying that the extra-terrestrial response pattern is not necessarily modelled on a question answer system.

“I am going to ask you some questions I think I already know the answer to so I can compile a data base from which I can begin to understand your language.”

[play recording]

When we heard this response, we were at first struck by its beauty, and were inclined to wonder if it would be better to consider the responses rather as music than as language. Once again, the Extra-terrestrial communications impose a definitional question: where do we place the distinction between language and music?

We then proceeded to ask our questions. I will now read to you each question sent to the extra-terrestrials followed by their responses:

“Do you hear my voice?”

[response](#)

“Are you responding?”

[response](#)

“Am I unknown to you?”

[response](#)

These four were purposefully framed as yes or no questions, so we could start to determine the lexical, syntactic, modulatory or translational similarity between the four presumably “yes” answers. Although as Dick has discussed in her paper, a yes would of course be dependant on the understanding of the words. First of all, as mentioned before, to the condition that the extra-terrestrials understand more of what we are saying than we do of them, but secondly of the presupposition of a shared definition for things like “voice”, “response” “conversation”, not to mention “I” “you” and “we”. But I refer you to Dick’s paper for a more in depth inquiry into the matter.

We then proceeded with two non binary questions:

“What color is space?”

“What is bigger your planet or my spaceship?”

[response](#)

These are unfortunately all of the responses we have received to date. Part of the delay is due to our attempt to change speaker. Our latest messages were sent using the voice of Ulysses Mutwa, another member of our team, but so far we have not received a response. Whether this is due to Avian interference, or the specific timbre and frequency of Mutwa’s voice (to the fact that it is a male voice perhaps), or to the content and nature of the messages itself, is impossible to determine at this time. Another possible conclusion lies in Mutwa’s “recognition” theory: that once the extra-terrestrials had responded to my first message, my voice, as identity was then “known” to them, making further communication possible. Further findings will be presented as data is received.

From the responses we have received, we have been able to identify and catalogue 8 modulation types.

1. Change in pitch (low to high, high to low)
2. Change in duration (this may refer to modulations between long and short sounds as well as to the texture of the sound; to borrow some musical vocabulary, the modulations between legato and staccato. In this category we have also classed rhythmic modulations)
3. Change in volume (loud to soft, soft to loud)
4. Change in voicing (aspirated to unaspirated etc.)
5. Change in intonation and accentuation (this category overlaps in many cases with the others, as intonation and accentuation can be measured in terms of pitch, duration and volume).
6. Change in voice timbre and quality, location in the mouth or throat.
7. Repetition (both as concerns the number of units in a phrase, and the number of repetitions of a source phoneme in what may be determined as a single unit)

8. The introduction of melody, and even harmony, not to be found in the original.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the key to deciphering the language perhaps lies in Avian translation. In spite of a very present informational dimension, Avian communication is not primarily information driven. It is rhetoric or “energy” driven in Alm’s sense, and is dependant upon the idea that “if the receiver does nothing, the message has no meaning”. (Kennedy 7). Our hypothesis is thus that the comprehension process itself is verbalized, or sung, in the form of the modulations we have shown. Creating or decrypting equivalences of these modulations to some feature of Simian language must await further data and analysis. However, we may already begin to wonder: as Simians, blinded as we are by what Vahni Capildeo has called our “information prejudice”, the unidimensionally symbolic habits expressed in the terms “signifier and signifier” for example, how can we begin to decode from this typology without falling back into semantic, information driven habits? This question has further political ramifications insofar as many have attempted to divide and hierarchize species based on their communicational strategies, but we will not have time to go into this here.

Capildeo’s work has shown that Simian languages are much less information driven than this history of Simian linguistics tends to represent. Capildeo cites Anna Gibb’s work on mimesis, in particular what is referred to as “Motherese”, which can be described as:

“a highly expressive, patterned, and repetitive way of speaking with exaggerated changes in pitch and intonation that seem to be designed to capture the babies’ attention and to meet and match the babies’ preferred sounds and movements in their particular rhythm, pace and intensity.”<sup>1</sup>

Mimicry can be understood as a response to the other, a borrowing of form that might be productively thought of as communication. By ‘communication’ in this context, however, I do not mean the transmission of information, but rather, “energy” in the sense of Alm’s *Universal Rhetoric*, as the receiver’s passionate modulations of material provided by a speaker. Perhaps the key lies in embracing Davies critique of the notion of “progress” that inflects conceptions of motherese, and relates it to the specist hierarchizing of animal communication: namely that motherese, belongs to babies and that Simians, as they become adults evolve beyond motherese to an informational, semantically driven symbolic language. And if this were but a prejudice woven into the history of traditional linguistic discourse? Undoing this prejudice could indeed provide the key to understanding the Extra-terrestrials.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Gibbs, “After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony and Mimetic Communication” in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 197.