



People

I'm so obsessed with Kinder Eggs, I translated the packaging into hundreds of languages including Klingon

However much translating the Kinder Egg warning message into multiple tongues might seem a pointless project to some, other people just get it



From Kinder Egg to Klingon – what chocolate can tell us about language (Photo: Getty Images)



By Keith Kahn-Harris

November 16, 2021 7:00 am

There is something so right about **Kinder Surprise Eggs**. The outer foil is a riot of orange and white, festooned with multicoloured, bouncy letters. Unwrap it and you find the smooth, warm



break it open and there is a rurner puzzie: what will the toy look like once assembled:

Kinder Surprise Eggs are instantly familiar, loved by many (not just children) and draw on the deepest levels of human symbolism. No wonder that every month, the number of Kinder Surprise Eggs sold worldwide would be enough to cover the surface of Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

And as with other classic brands – Heinz Tomato Ketchup for example – most of its competitors are fated to be seen as second-rate. Products such as Kinder Surprise Eggs are often taken for granted. They are just there, nestling on the shelves of a supermarket or (as in my local corner shop) on the counter next to the cash register.

Sign up and get all of i's film, TV and book reviews in one place, every week



Read More

Tesco to sell 88 products in reusable packaging with beer, ketchup and tea all included on 'Loop' aisle

I don't remember a time when I didn't know that Kinder Surprise Eggs existed. When my children were younger, the Eggs were a handy go-to treat to keep them busy or distracted. I knew what they were and what to expect of them; they were reliable. I didn't pay much attention to them. Yet at some point I found something within a Kinder Surprise Egg that forced me to sit up and pay attention; to stop taking them for granted and look at them with fresh eyes.

One day, as I was assembling the toy for my son, I glanced at the small sheet of paper included within the capsule. I had seen it before, maybe I had even read it, but on this occasion I actually saw it. It drew me in, sparking an obsession that has lasted for years, long after my children entered adolescence and were no longer interested in the product.

The flimsy document found in Kinder Surprise Eggs – only 12cm by 5cm, covered on both sides with tiny text – has become, for me, a kind of treasure map. It has led me on an adventure that is still unfolding.

In Europe, as well as in large swathes of Asia and the Middle East, crammed into 120cm² is a riot of blood red and jet black scripts, gnomonic texts, strange diacritics and mysterious symbols. Scan your eye over the text more closely and you are likely to find a few words that look familiar:



Cornish, Welsh... and Biblical Hebrew

Kinder Eggs and I have a history. I first came out to the public as a warning message-lover at a talk I gave at the 2017 Boring Conference in London. In preparation for the talk, I commissioned translations of the warning message into more languages. I started with Irish and Maltese, in order to complete the set of EU languages. After that I found it hard to stop: I collected Luxembourgish, Cornish, Welsh and then Biblical Hebrew. At the end of the talk I led the audience in a joke pledge to never buy another Kinder Egg until they included a translation of the warning message into Cornish.

In 2018 I recorded a [podcast for the BBC Boring Talks series](#) and added yet more languages to the collection. I also included an appeal for listeners to send me warning message sheets from around the world, and listeners in South Africa, Brunei and Nepal duly obliged.

Every so often, following the release of the podcast, I'd receive an email offering me a translation into a new language. I received one such email in March 2020, in the first phase of the pandemic. The sender inquired whether I would be interested in a recording of the warning message into Shanghainese (it could only be a recording as the language is never written down).



Read More

[How one woman saved South Africa's oldest language](#)

In the end, the offer didn't pan out, but it still flicked some kind of switch in my brain. In a time of disconnection, commissioning translations would bring me connection, yet the translations themselves would be unreadable to me. Could there be a better metaphor for the human yearning to reach out to others and the limits of doing so?

Another thought seized me: for some years I had been writing and researching about the worst aspects of humanity. I had published [two books](#) that went to very dark places, exploring racism, anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial and other forms of denialism. I had argued that we needed to come to terms with the fact that human diversity isn't always something to celebrate, since human beings hold to a wide range of incompatible moralities and desires. I still believe this, but I had a strong yearning to demonstrate the other side of the coin, that human diversity can be a wonderful thing.

To write about linguistic diversity during challenging times reminded me that language is the most amazing thing that human beings have created. So spring and summer last year saw me firing off email after email: to language promotion officers in the Channel Islands, to professors of Sumerian, to [Romani rights activists](#), to creators of invented languages, and to almost everyone



The label's languages

[Side one]

Armenian (1)

Azerbaijani

Bulgarian

Czech

Danish

German

Greek

English

Spanish

Estonian

Finnish

French

Croatian

Hungarian

Armenian (2)

Italian

Georgian

Kyrgyz

[Side two]

Lithuanian

Latvian

Macedonian

Dutch

Norwegian

Polish

Portuguese

Romanian

Russian

Slovak

Slovene

Albanian

Serbian

Swedish

Turkish

Ukrainian





Chinese (Traditional characters)

Chinese (Simplified characters)

Some never replied, a few frostily refused, but the majority agreed and many more went further: sending me the translations by return, recommending experts in other languages, offering me reams of explanations as to word choice. I posted the results of my searches on my blog and on social media. As my collection grew, so people would write to me explaining how much they enjoyed the project and encouraging me to keep going.

However much translating the Kinder Egg warning message into multiple tongues might seem a pointless project to some, other people just get it. Reading languages you do not understand is an underrated pleasure. I'm not the only person to find the experience of seeing a familiar message rendered unfamiliar an enchanting one. And my joy in incomprehension is all the greater when the translation appears in a script I've never previously encountered, features unusual diacritics, or just looks plain weird.

Read More

[Being bilingual at any age is an advantage because of how it changes the brain](#)

I also have a serious agenda: my experience of reaching out to linguists and speakers of a vast array of languages across the world has taught me that a world that speaks in many languages is one in which human individuality and invention can flourish. There is unity here too; unity in incomprehension. When I encounter a language I don't understand I am reminded of the amazing tendency of human beings to forge new paths, to do things in different ways.

But around half the world's languages are classified as seriously endangered and some estimates suggest that by the end of the century, 90 per cent of our languages will have lost their last living native speaker. Globalisation, the mass media, migration to big cities and the centralised modern nation state have all contributed to this erosion.





Kinder Surprise Eggs are popular around the world, as the range of languages on their packaging shows (Photo: Getty Images)

Linguistic diversity is linked to biodiversity, as the same forces threaten both. Just as we need to treasure and protect the ecological diversity of the natural world, so should we guard the diversity of the human world. Translations of the warning message into endangered or lesser-known languages remind us that these languages live, they exist and should not be erased.

Revealing the ambiguities in the warning message, the messy process through which it has been translated and the challenges in communicating it, also makes a powerful statement: we refuse to silence the glorious babble of humanity, we refuse to treat any language, any nation, any state, as deserving of a louder voice, a bigger platform.

'The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language' by Keith Kahn-Harris (Icon Books, £12.99) is out now 

Topics

[Chocolate](#) / [Features](#) / [Language](#) / [Languages](#)

More from Lifestyle





How I Manage My Money: A banker-turned-author on a household income of £2.5k a month

INVESTING

The latest cryptocurrency price predictions after Bitcoin and others crash

WELLBEING

FIRST PERSON **If I'd had NHS help as an overweight child, I would never have become an obese adult**

MONEY

What legacy benefits are, and the DWP court case explained

PEOPLE

FIRST PERSON **Like Sykes and McGuinness, I was diagnosed with autism as an adult. I'm now so much happier**

MONEY

'There's still no sign of my £1,000 chair after three months. What can be done?'

Essentials

[News](#)

[Sport](#)

[Lifestyle](#)

Useful links

[Contact Us](#)

[About](#)

[Advertise](#)





[ibuys](#)

[i newsletters](#)

[i app](#)

[Sitemap](#)

Follow us on



All rights reserved. © 2021 Associated Newspapers Limited.

[Cookie Settings](#)

[Don't sell my info](#)

[Terms and Conditions](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

