

Language

The man who went to work on an egg

Studying a Kinder Egg warning label led to a surprising linguistic journey around the globe for Keith Kahn-Harris

● The 'lockdown project' rapidly became a cliché: The bread-baking, bassoon-playing, Japanese-learning homemaker battling through the ennui of isolation. And yet that drive to find something new to occupy oneself with during a time of intense anxiety and separation was certainly real, and even healthy.

Although I didn't bake sourdough as my wife did, from March 2020 I searched for that special something to ease my lockdown woes. I sampled military rations from Lithuania; I became addicted to reviews of luxury yachts on YouTube; I took up learning Finnish. None of these were enough though. I needed something more interactive, more quixotic and more enthralling.

And I found that something in the multilingual warning messages inside Kinder Surprise Eggs.

The warning message and I had a history. The 37 languages on a tiny piece of paper were the subject of my talk at the 2017 Boring Conference, subsequently recorded as a BBC Boring Talk in 2018. At the time this was a bit of fun, a light-hearted celebration of linguistic diversity. Showing what the Kinder Surprise warning message would look like translated into Cornish, Biblical Hebrew and Luxembourgish was not intended to be a career move. Yet that's how things have ended up.

In spring 2020 I had a desperate desire to connect. It wasn't just my family and friends that I missed but the casual and surprising encounters that make life richer. I didn't realise until lockdown how much I needed

positive interaction with strangers, particularly the sort of interaction that turns strangers into something more. So I began firing off emails. I contacted indigenous language activists in Australia, professors of ancient languages, regional governments in Europe, teachers of all kinds of tongues. My request was always the same: Please can you supply me with a translation of the following message:

WARNING, read and keep: Toy not suitable for children under 3 years. Small parts might be swallowed or inhaled.

Maybe the people I contacted were as starved of interaction as I was, but most of them responded positively. My 'collection' grew rapidly as I added everything from Abkhazian to Amharic, Ancient Egyptian to American Sign Language, Klingon to Kurdish, Romansch to Romani. At the same time, I buried myself in solitary research. I became ever more enthralled by the warning message sheet. I discovered mysteries in the multilingual messages, some of which I solved – what does the 'CE' logo mean? – while others remained unsolved. I even found mistakes – the diacritics in the Estonian warning are wrong! Through the community of Kinder Surprise



The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language by Keith Kahn-Harris is out now (Loon Books, £12.99). He is still looking for translations of the Kinder Surprise warning message and can be contacted via his website, kahn-harris.org

collectors I found a website that archives different versions of the warning message going back to the late 1980s. I even managed to buy a mint-condition early 1990s warning message on eBay.

There is something invigorating about doing something with no particular end in mind. For a while, this absolutely pointless quest was rewarding for its own sake. Each friendly email that arrived with a new translation made me happy. Each hard-won revelation as the warning message sheet gave up its secrets filled my heart with joy.

Inevitably though, given that I am an incurable sociologist and rabid writer, my purposeless collecting became A Project. I found myself writing a book. Although I wanted to show off the wonderful translations I had collected and to share my investigations into the Kinder Surprise warning messages, I also wanted to do something bigger. I realised that one of the reasons that soliciting translations had brought me such joy during a very dark time was that language itself is a joyful thing. In particular, languages one doesn't understand can be a source of pleasure. I love reading scripts I cannot interpret; I love strange accents over vowels and meeting characters I have never encountered before. The sheer range of ways that human beings have found to communicate with each other is both baffling and delightful. And maybe if we could learn to appreciate linguistic diversity, we could learn to appreciate the diversity of humanity that gave rise to language in the first place.

My book **The Babel Message: A Love Letter to Language** came out in early November. It's a strange time. We are now going out again, encountering strangers, friends and families as we once did. Still, there is a shadow hanging over us; we know that while we might be done with Covid, it might not be done with us. Do we hug? Do we shake hands? Do we dance and sing? We certainly have less time for the projects we pursued in lockdown as we resume commuting and the remorseless rhythms of modern life.

In such a context, we are likely to rapidly lose touch with how much we missed others. As we struggle for room on a packed tube, the other becomes a threat once again. My book though, provides a helpful corrective, at least for me. Celebrating language – even the language of a warning message in a Kinder Surprise Egg – is a way of celebrating our social selves; the remarkable, infuriating fact that humans do not come in only one variety.

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