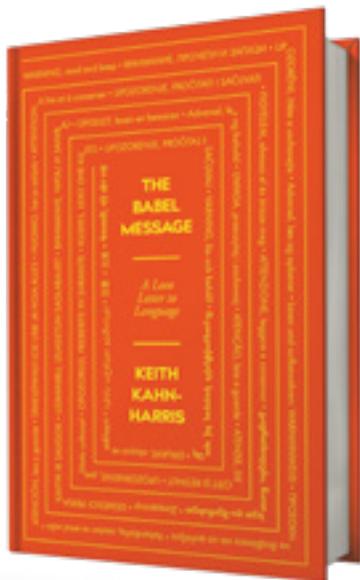


The Babel Message

REVIEWED BY MARJOLEIN GROOT NIBBELINK



This book is about the safety warning (dubbed the "Message") on a paper sheet (the "Manuscript") inside Kinder Surprise Eggs — a chocolate treat for children. The writer's unique sense of humor is immediately evident from the press release included in the parcel: "If you are one of the 75,000 people in Estonia who speak Võro, please find your press release overleaf."

Dr. Keith Kahn-Harris is a grinning, bespectacled sociologist whose appearance seriously channels ZZ Top. This is his seventh book, but, as he puts it, "My first on Kinder Surprise Eggs." The book begins by exploring the capacity and limitations of language, especially when confined to a small space

such as the multi-folded Manuscript inside a Kinder Surprise Egg. For readers in the US, some descriptions and analysis might be a bit opaque as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the traditional Kinder Egg concept in 1993. Edible items, according to the FDA, should never contain non-edible items. And this danger is exactly what the Message warns about.

The idea of someone writing a 300-page book solely on this short text is captivating. The book gets quite philosophical by page 20, exploring the meaning and existence of language in general. Eventually, it becomes apparent that the book won't actually be explaining why and how the languages on the Manuscript were selected, why there is so much difference between them, and how these choices might be influenced. Instead, it explores how one might see a culture through the script and languages presented, as well as what limits us to do so. It's about the fascinating cultural and geographical history that shaped the languages we know today and helps us realize that linguistic evolution is always ongoing. It's about navigating the fine differences between minority languages and indigenous languages and how appropriating them can be perceived as either validating or offensive.

In exploring countless languages ranging from the widespread (Hindi) to the obscure (Occitan), Kahn-Harris uses a quirky and inviting style reminiscent of Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* and fills in the blanks by acquiring additional translations. He then goes down the proverbial rabbit hole to understand the intricacies of similar scripts with a passion familiar to those who work with language.

After all of these additional translations and forays into the sociolinguistic histories of so many countries and peoples, the reader may still be left wondering about the factors that drove Ferrero's choices regarding their warning message. But when approached as an exploration of language, culture, and localization viewed through a seemingly innocuous lens, it's a great read for anyone interested in those topics. 🌐

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