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Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Translation and Discussion

by Sarah L. Higley

Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

Reviewed by Jim Henry

Jim Henry was born in 1973 in Decatur, Georgia, and has lived in the Atlanta area most of his life. He started creating constructed languages in 1989 after discovering Tolkien's Quenya and Noldorin (in *The Book of Lost Tales* rather than his better-known works), but his early works were all vocabulary and no syntax. In 1996, after discovering Jeffrey Henning's conlang site and the CONLANG mailing list, he started creating somewhat more sophisticated fictional languages; and in 1998, he started developing his personal engineered language gjâ-zym-byn, which has occupied most of his conlanging energies since then, and in which he has developed some degree of fluency. He retired recently after working for some years as a software developer, and does volunteer work for the Esperanto Society of Metro Atlanta, Project Gutenberg, and the Language Creation Society.

* * *

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a German abbess and visionary, is probably best known among makers of constructed languages as being the first known conlanger. Her Lingua Ignota survives in two manuscripts containing very similar glossaries, and in a hymn, "O Orzchis Ecclesia", mostly in Latin with five words in the Lingua Ignota. The glossaries consist of taxonomic lists of 1012 nouns (some repeated) with glosses in Latin and German (some words glossed in only one language, many in both). Of the Lingua Ignota words in the hymn, only one word can be unambiguously found in the glossaries; Higley finds less certain correspondences for two more, postulating inflected forms and reuse of root morphemes. The manuscripts also contain a 23-letter alphabet, the Ignotae Litterae.

Sarah L. Higley, a mediaevalist at the University of Rochester, is better known in the conlang community by her pen name and online handle "Sally Caves", as the creator of the remarkable naturalistic conlang Teonaht. She has done research on the conlang community with at least three surveys done in 1998, 2003 and 2005; she previously published an article on the subject, "Audience, Uglossia, and CONLANG: Inventing Languages on the Internet" (M/C Journal, March 2000, http://www.uq.edu.au/mc/0003/languages.php), and she draws on that research in

this book, as she puts the Lingua Ignota in the context of language invention through the ages.

Some scholars have cast doubt on the authenticity of the Lingua Ignota glossary manuscripts; there is evidence from from letters Hildegard wrote and from a near-contemporary biography that she invented a language of some kind, but the authenticity of the letters and accuracy of the biography is questioned by some. Is the language described in these manuscripts Hildegard's work or someone else's? Higley comes down solidly on the side of those who think the glossaries authentic.

> "Whether she had help in recording it or not, Hildegard's Lingua should be seen in context with her other bold achievements (founding and managing monasteries, writing books and letters, preaching, traveling, advising and composing music) that shook off the professional restrictions medieval women suffered."

There has been no scholarly consensus about Hildegard's purpose for the language. Higley points out that most of the scholarly discussion of Hildegard's language has connected it with spontaneous glossolalia or the linguistic symptoms of schizophrenia and other mental disorders, with the philosophical languages of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or with the better-known nineteenth and early twentieth century international auxiliary languages. Some have described it as a "secret language", which Higley regards as obviously wrong, since Hildegard apparently authorized publication of the glossary we have, or of an earlier version from which our glossaries were copied. Higley thinks the Lingua Ignota fits better, at least in some important respects, into the category of people devising constructed languages for personal (though not necessarily secret) use, as works of art — though there are important differences as well between Hildegard's ideas about her work and those of most modern conlangers about theirs.

After an initial chapter giving an overview of the Lingua Ignota and the previous scholarship on it, Higley moves into a discussion of glossolalia and glossographia, in order to lay the groundwork for refuting the frequently repeated classification of Hildegard's Lingua with glossolalia. She points out that a reduced phoneme inventory and restricted, CV phonotactics are not sufficient evidence of glossolalia; some deliberately constructed languages have phonology as simple, not to mention natural languages like Hawai'ian. Typical glossolalia, by contrast with glossopoeia or conlanging, has no linguistic structure; no morphemes or syntax. By this criterion Hildegard's Lingua is clearly not glossolalic; the various words in the glossaries are defined with specific meanings, and furthermore Higley finds evidence of some derivational morphology, in syllables that commonly recur in words of related meaning. (But even by the more simplistic criterion the Lingua is probably not of glossolalic origin, since, as Higley points out in her final chapter, it contains many consonant clusters and closed syllables.) This chapter (and much of the entire book) consists of Higley refuting the wrongheaded theories of academics who don't have the first idea about why someone like Hildegard — or anyone, for that matter — would create a language; these intraacademic debates may be not very interesting to conlangers. One passage in the glossolalia chapter stands out, however:

> "[Hélène] Smith's Martian has a structure that Pentecostal glossolalia does not — and so does Hildegard's Lingua with its compounds, gendered endings, and its translations. Théodore Flournoy notes that there are "different types of glossolalia," and he even employs the term "glosopoesy": of a "complete fabrication, including all the parts of a new language *by a subconscious activity*." Thus we see how difficult it is for the psychoanalyst or the critic to separate glossopoeia from its most interesting, because essentially abnormal or pathological, developments, as in the case of Smith and her trance-states, or the case of Edward Kelley and his scrying activities for John Dee." (p. 41)

Earlier Higley wrote,

> "And yet Tolkien's omission from scholarly studies of language experiment reveals a persistent attitude that regards Quenya as being without linguistic or academic capital because of its overexposure by fandom and its underdevelopment of insanity." (p. 8)

It's easy enough to see why psychoanlysts would be more interested in glossolalia and other linguistic behavior that is or can be seen as resulting from mental abnormality. And it's unfortunately easy to understand why some academics tend to avoid studying things that are popular with mass culture, like Tolkien's works. But I'm boggled by the fact that, according to Higley, academics in general seem to find the linguistic by-products of insanity more interesting and worthy of study than the deliberate creative works of more or less healthy people. Do they apply the same criterion to other arts? Are the works of insane novelists, for instance, automatically considered more worthy of study than those by comparatively levelheaded novelists?

> "...[C]onventional academic studies of such things too often exhibit our love of the "fool": we are in love with the *fou de langage*, the *naif*; we respond to mystics, visionaries, and tongues speakers as though they were children — there is something that excites us about the loss of control in ecstasy or lunacy, and bores us with the conscious, years-long development of a personal and fictional language by a respected philologist who created a popular world for it that has had too much press." (p. 100)

The next chapters discuss Hildegard's work in the context of mediaeval language philosophy, and language invention from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Much of the material in these chapters will be new to many readers, but most of the languages she describes are more interesting for their social or psychological context than for their conlinguistic properties. I had never heard of George Psalmanazar's "Formosan", a hoax conlang purporting to be the language of Formosa (Taiwan), or Hélène Smith's Martian, a trance-language which Flournoy (quoted above) attributes to subconscious invention, but which seems to have been a simplified relex of French. Higley also discusses St. Thomas More's Utopian, John Dee and Edward Kelley's angelic language, and Bala-i-balan, apparently originating with a heterodox Muslim sect.

Then, in the long chapter "Play and Aesthetic in Contemporary Language Invention", Higley talks about modern conlanging as a form of recreation or art, previously done in isolation (as described by Tolkien in "A Secret Vice"), but more recently as part of an online community. Here she draws on her experience in the online conlanger community, and the results of her surveys, to describe the community and the range of modern conlanging — pretty thoroughly considering the space limitations imposed by her publisher — and to draw comparisons of modern conlangers' inventions with Hildegard's:

> "Indeed, the ambiguity of play and aesthetic in this pursuit is apparent in the disputes about whether private language invention is a 'hobby' or an 'artform.' ..... It may appear that this development moves furthest away from what Hildegard was doing: a second glance shows that despite their philosophical, cultural, or religious differences, their invented languages derive, as perhaps did Hildegard's Lingua, from private joy taken in verbal innovation." (p. 83)

> "The difference, then, between language invention in our day and Hildegard's lies in the acknowledgement of the imaginary, imitative, and essentially 'fake' nature of this pursuit. Hildegard would never have spoken of her Lingua as 'pretend' or 'false', or even as a 'game.' For her it was a transcendent truth." (p. 97)

The first of these passages seems apt enough; the second may generalize too freely about the attitudes of modern conlangers toward their conlangs. Probably it would describe the majority of artlangers, who situate their languages in more or less developed fictional worlds; there are exceptions, though, and not only among makers of engelangs and auxlangs.

Higley devotes a fair amount of space to discussing Hildegard's femininity as such, and the extent to which her language's lexicon reveals a feminine perspective on the world (slightly, but not nearly as much as Suzette Haden Elgin's Láadan). In her discussion of modern artistic conlanging, she focuses particularly on female conlangers (Irina Rempt, Sylvia Sotomayor, Suzette Haden Elgin and Ursula Le Guin), though without entirely neglecting notable male conlangers (H.S. Teoh, Christophe Grandsire, Dirk Elzinga, Matthew Pearson and John Quijada and their languages are all mentioned, and Paul Burgess's mna Vanantha is discussed at some length, besides discussions of Tolkien and Okrand and their languages). However, she clearly says: "...in the contemporary conlangs by women, which I have perused, I do not find a marked 'feminine' approach to language invention". She later points out that many of the the grammatically interesting features of Elgin's Láadan (its evidentiality system, for instance) are also found in some form in conlangs created by men. Later, in her discussion of phonaesthetics, she remarks that "Preference for any sound or combination of sounds is highly subjective, cannot be assigned to gender, and tendencies toward liquids and gutterals, expansive or limited phonologies are shared by men and women alike." (p. 99)

One notable female conlanger absent from Higley's discussion, except by allusion, is Sally Caves. Plainly she could not write about her own work at length with academic objectivity the

way she writes about Kēlēn or Láadan; but in her final chapter, she apparently alludes to her own history:

> "Let me provide a hypothetical about a young American glossopoeist, ten years old. Exposed to Spanish and afire with the possibilities of creating her own, better language, she continues to pursue the game to which her friends have long abandoned her. She turns it into a project that has the status for her of her invented towns, peoples, street maps, and houses — all forms of utopian simulacra — and she vividly imagines a world peopled with beings who speak this language, and to whose deities she can privately appeal. .....
>
> "Then let us suppose that when she is fifteen and has been introduced to a popular and complex fictional language, she looks at her own efforts in contempt. Learning other languages gives her more critical focus in college. Exposure to graduate study in linguistics and philology makes her sneer at her project in college." (pp. 107-108)

Putting this in the third person, hypothetically, without naming the girl or her language, might conceivably be due to a fear that saying too much about her own conlanging in this context could invoke suspicion (among fellow academics) of a lack of objectivity on many of the points under discussion. I can't be sure, though. The "hypothetical" is transparent enough to me, but I don't know how J. Random Academic would read it.

This discussion of the "young American glossopoeist" comes in a context where she relates modern notions of "creativity" to Hildegard's *visio*. Most modern conlangers would describe their work as hobby, craft or at best as a kind of art; Hildegard seems to have had a more exalted view of her Lingua, relating it to the visions she received, as a kind of private revelation or divine inspiration. How much of this is a real difference in thought, and how much is it a difference in terminology?

The last chapter returns to focus on the Lingua Ignota; she analyzes the words of the glossary, finding probable content morphemes and grammatical endings in many of the recurrent substrings which Jeffrey Schnapp psychoanalyzed as "obsessive leitmotifs". For instance, "-buz" occurs in a large subset of the words for trees and bushes; "-zia" occurs frequently in words for body parts and plants; "-schia" occurs mostly in words for plants, and a few for birds. Some other endings seem to correlate strongly with the gender of the equivalent Latin word. Besides these, there is clear evidence of reuse of root morphemes in other sets of words (for family relations, body parts, kinds of book, etc.).

The form of many of the words seems to have been influenced by the sound of Latin or German words of similar meaning; others may involve onomatopoeia or other sound-symbolism:

> "One of my favorites is *Zinzrinz*, 'winding staircase,' which for me imitates not only the repeating coil of the stairwell but the hissing vertigo one experiences descending it." (p. 106)

In this final chapter, Higley talks at some length about Paul Burgess, a modern conlanger perhaps more similar in outlook to Hildegard than most. Unlike most conlangers, Burgess is fluent in his mna Vanantha, which he started creating when he was thirteen. The only extended text in the language he's presented to the world is "mna Sipri Cilama", "The Celestial Labors", an allegorical story in mna Vanantha with no detailed translation or gloss (http://www.paulburgess.org/msc.html). Higley finds some parallels between this text and Hildegard's *Scivias*, although the latter was written in Latin with no use of her Lingua Ignota. In Burgess' work, and that of a few other modern conlangers like him, we can perhaps see a bridge between the modern notion of "creativity" and Hildegard's "vision". Higley quotes Irina Rempt as saying that her conculture has grown "more like discovery than creation" (p. 109). The hermeticity of mna Vanantha — Burgess once described it in general terms in postings to the CONLANG list, but has never published a detailed grammar or lexicon — suggests for Higley a connection to the mysterious words in "O Orzchis Ecclesia":

> "The unglossed words in the sung antiphon are more powerful for me than the systematic lemmata of the *Ignota Lingua* despite its many fascinations. One wonders what it is that Burgess displays for others if he does not translate it, unless we return to the notion of mysticism and its connections with muteness, silence, the 'hermetic'. There is obviously something in the appeal of the spiritual and mysterious that, combined with gifts in language, music, oration, painting, and vision, can lead to creations of this sort that more resemble devotion than taxonomy." (p. 110)

At the end of this last chapter Higley discusses the basic purpose of artistic conlanging: "what is it that glossopoeists are saying in their languages?" Since most conlangers (probably including Hildegard) have never written anything as extensive as the "mna Sipri Cilama", in most cases the point of these conlangs seems primarily to be the nature of the language itself, its structure and semantics, the poetry of its words which seem to their creator more fitting for their referents than natural-language words, or (better yet) have no concise natural-language equivalents. *Langue* rather than *parole* seems to be the focus of most artlangers. Creating new words and names for things can be a way of "making the familiar strange, or rather making the things of this world divine again through the alterity of new signs" (p. 111).

Following the main text and its footnotes, there appear six photo plates showing pages of the different manuscripts, and then Higley's edition of the *Ignota Lingua*, based primarily on the Riesencodex but with additional glosses from the Berlin manuscript. She begins with a discussion of these two surviving manuscripts and of the Vienna manuscript (lost sometime after 1830, but a description survives), their history and differences from one another, the dialect area the German glosses probably come from, the orthography, their distinctive formatting, and so forth. Then she discusses in more detail the glosses; the Riesencodex uses about seven hundred Latin words and three hundred German words, with a few Lingua Ignota words left

unglossed and a few glossed in both Latin and German. The Berlin MS provides glosses in both languages for more Lingua Ignota words, but still leaves some unglossed. Assuming the Berlin MS was based on the Riesencodex (Higley thinks it possible, though some earlier scholars disagree; I don't understand the paleographic and linguistic evidence she bases her argument on well enough to evaluate it), the scribe responsible for the former added German translations of many Latin words and Latin translations of many German words, but not nearly all. In addition, the Berlin MS omits some of Hildegard's Lingua Ignota words, such as those for male and female genitals, though oddly enough a blank space is left where they would be.

Both glossaries are arranged in a taxonomic order, beginning with words for spiritual things, then a list of kinship terms, sufferers of disease or accident, body parts, and so on. Higley analyzes the taxonomy but notes that she has not annotated its finest subcategories. In some cases the section of the glossary a word is in helps indicate the correct English translation of a polysemous Latin or German gloss.

Higley's edition of the glossary fills 28 pages. Each word is numbered according to its position in the Riesencodex, and the Lingua Ignota word is followed by its Latin and/or German glosses, with the manuscript source of each gloss indicated, and finally an English translation (sometimes tentative, or omitted entirely). For instance, from the section Higley captions as "Clothing for Hildegard's Nuns on Massdays":

611 **Baiz**, R: pannus (B: duoch) CLOTH
612 **Schagur**, (R: roclin, B: —) SKIRT
613 **Schirizim**, (R: stucha, B: —) WOMAN'S HANGING SLEEVE

There follow 16 pages of footnotes to the translations, and an alphabetical version of the Lingua Ignota glossary, in which the Latin and German glosses appear along with Higley's English translations, but without manuscript source information, e.g.,

183 **Abiliz**, bladera; BLISTER II.A.4
214 **Abiol**, abbas; ABBOT II.B.1
279 **Abiza**, domus; HOUSE II.B.2.a

The numerals in the right column refer to the categories in Higley's analysis of the taxonomy.

Finally, there is a seven-page bibliography and an eight-page index, which seem to be fairly useful.

In summary, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language* is as thorough an introduction to the Lingua Ignota as one could wish for, and one of the best books on conlanging as art in English, along with Arika Okrent's *In the Land of Invented Languages*. (Most other books on conlangs

either focus on philosophical conlangs or would-be international auxiliary languages, have serious flaws of treatment, or are outdated in saying nothing about the explosion of artlanging in the last twenty years or so.) Higley's discussion of artistic conlanging through history and in recent years is well-grounded and insightful, both in itself and its relation to Hildegard's Lingua.

Her analysis of the phonaesthetics of various conlangs is marred slightly by a failure to give IPA symbols or otherwise precisely specify the sounds she is talking about; one may have to go to the documentation of the individual conlangs to find out what sounds are represented by their orthographic symbols. And her analysis of the Lingua Ignota itself, though strong on philosophy, semantics and morphology, would be improved by more analysis (necessarily tentative, since we don't know for sure how the various letters and digraphs were supposed to be pronounced) of its phonology and phonotactics. She easily refutes the assertions of some earlier writers that it consists of the open syllables typical of glossolalia, offers some observations about which graphemes most often occur at the beginnings of words, and some tentative speculations about how some of the doubtful graphemes were pronounced, but doesn't go much farther. However, I've learned in private correspondence that she was working under a severe word count limit imposed by her publisher, and hopes to remedy these omissions by publishing a separate article on the Lingua's phonotactics.