

This week in Google Alerts: The rules do not apply to this review of _Home Fires_

The Urth list — 28 messages, 8 voices, 08 Feb 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5951>

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Gwern Branwen — 08 Feb 2011, 01:10

<http://littleredreviewer.wordpress.com/2011/02/02/gene-wolfes-home-fires-rules-just-dont-apply-here/>

...I'd like to tell you about a specific non-spoilery example of Wolfe's world-building through dialog instead of exposition, because I immediately jumped to a conclusion, which of course turned out to be wrong, and then I felt like a character in the book.

Skip is a high flying attorney, and he has a secretary, who in turn has an assistant, who in turn has a helper. Skip's law firm has what appears to be an old fashioned style "secretary pool", and during a phone conversation the employees in the pool are referred to by first name only, as no one has bothered to learn their last names. My first thought was what kind of a sexist, almost Mad Men-esque future Earth is this? When did Gene Wolfe start writing like Heinlein (who you know I love), to whom female employees are all "girls" and usually helpless assistants? Wolfe is not having a Heinlein moment. This is a future Earth where there are too many people, and not enough jobs. Where companies (and not just Skip's law firm) are compelled by government regulations to hire so many people, even if there is no work for that person to do. This is a future Earth where low unemployment is more important than efficiency, and where resources are so scarce that adults will do anything to get and keep a job, including sitting in a secretarial pool all day waiting for a memo to type....

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

David Duffy — 17 Feb 2011, 07:47 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

- odd discussion of Wolfe's linguistic choices in TBOTNS:
<http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/491538-wolfe-s-writing-style-yay-or-nay>

This is part of a group reading

http://www.goodreads.com/topic/group_folder/69982

Cheers, David Duffy.

David Stockhoff — 19 Feb 2011, 12:27 · in reply to David Duffy

Funny that the guy who complained about Wolfe's use of Latin calls himself Lepton. I am assuming he is not actually Greek, yet he resurrects this archaic language and reuses its dead, worn-out words. ;)

I was interested to read this thought:

"Yes, I know what Latin is. What I'm saying is that the sword is not actually called Terminus Est. It's name is actually in English, which to Severian and the other characters is an ancient and

defunct language. If Wolfe gave us the actual name of the sword, it would convey to us the meaning but not the sense. So Wolfe translates it to Latin."

We've had some debates about names and languages used (towns on the Whorl, etc.). But I am not sure anyone has proposed that the dead language is actually English, even though this would explain some of Severian's linguistic explanations, among other things. There is probably a limit to how literally one can take the idea, but generally sense it works well and yet is not obvious. And of course it's another puzzle of the simplest and most confounding kind.

On 2/17/2011 2:47 AM, David Duffy wrote:

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Gerry Quinn — 19 Feb 2011, 13:14 · in reply to David Stockhoff

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

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I read that too. My first thought was that it was not English, because English is clearly referenced by Thea in her speech about "when the damn men went to Verthandi". In the ancient language of the dawn men, "Present" means both "Now" and "The Gift". She is baffled as to how anyone could use a language so confusing.

But still the question arises as to whether "Terminus Est" may be written in that ancient language, rather than some other. On the face of it there is no firm reason why it should not be English, but I don't really believe it. Latin is part of the public consciousness of the modern world - most people could not read it but few would not recognise it. And it is a close ancestor of English - we use many words derived from it. The language Thea speaks of seems older, and at least as incomprehensible as Egyptian hieroglyphics are to us.

So I don't think it is English, but I don't think it can be definitively ruled out. I don't know if I'd call it a puzzle as such, though.

- Gerry Quinn

David Stockhoff — 19 Feb 2011, 16:27 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 2/19/2011 8:14 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

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- Gerry Quinn

I have 2 thoughts in response to that:

---if Latin is so close to English, especially from 20,000 years on, then why try to distinguish them at all? They are both the language of the dawn men. And it is the dawn men, after all, who used Latin and Greek and English---the language of physics---to invent rockets and space ships and colonize the stars.

---Thea's story, to me, is proof that the language she speaks of is English---although for all I know the same pun exists in other Germanic/Latinate languages, and the only reason the actual word "present" is used is that the book is published in English (the Star Trek rule, in which all languages are presented as English). If that's true, then the answer is not so clear and yet a little less important.

It may not be a puzzle in itself, but plainly there are plenty of linguistic riddles and such in the book.

Marc Aramini — 19 Feb 2011, 17:11 · in reply to David Stockhoff

This perspicuous language they speak, where one meaning corresponds to one word (how could present be now and gift?), is the height of irony in regards to Severian and his tale, and this is something that always surprised me. How any language could approach a one to one relationship between symbol and symbolized seemed an impossibility as fantastic as the alzabo, and Severian's entire tale seems to belie this clarity of meaning in language ("he was the smallest of those dead" for example, is completely ambiguous). It's pretty clear when Johnson tried to compile his dictionary with the protestant ethos of scripture (the word of God was immutable law) that it was an impossible task, rife with interpretation.

I always saw this as a slightly theological analogy here, that one Word can have many interpretations or instantiations, in direct opposition to the idea that the Words themselves could be free from an interpretive task.

Gerry Quinn — 19 Feb 2011, 17:59 · in reply to David Stockhoff

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

On 2/19/2011 8:14 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

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I other words I think:

<Terminus Est> : <Sev's language> :: Latin : English
<language Thea mentions> : <Sev's language> :: <really ancient language> : English

The language Thea mentions is clearly present-day English. So the timeline is like:

<really ancient language> (not mentioned)

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<'Terminus Est' language> (translated to Latin by Gene Wolfe) <Severian's language>
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- Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn — 19 Feb 2011, 18:09 · in reply to Marc Aramini

From: "Marc Aramini" <marcaramini at yahoo.com>

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You make a good point [though I don't see what is ambiguous about "he was the smallest of those dead" - but then again I don't remember the context]. A real human language must surely tolerate ambiguity. Indeed we have almost proof of this in the shape of another language we encounter, that of Loyal to the Group of Seventeen! This language is clearly inefficient, but it

seems certain to be full of ambiguity.

Perhaps Thea is not very thoughtful, or perhaps Wolfe just stuck in the line about ambiguity as a joke.

- Gerry Quinn

Fernando Gouvea — 19 Feb 2011, 18:11 · in reply to David Stockhoff

The same pun works in Portuguese, and probably in many other languages derived from Latin.

Fernando

On 2/19/2011 11:27 AM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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=====

Fernando Q. Gouvea <http://www.colby.edu/~fqgouvea>
Carter Professor of Mathematics
Colby College
5836 Mayflower Hill Editor, MAA Reviews
Waterville, ME 04901 <http://www.maa.org/maareviews>

HELP! MY TYPEWRITER IS BROKEN!
-- E. E. CUMMINGS

David Stockhoff — 19 Feb 2011, 18:44 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Definitely. At very least, it's a broad wink.

On 2/19/2011 12:11 PM, Marc Aramini wrote:

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David Stockhoff — 19 Feb 2011, 19:33 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 2/19/2011 12:59 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff@verizon.net>

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No question of that. But "lepton" is still a Greek word in origin. By using a Greek word out of its context (not sure if it existed at all in Greek, but since the meaning is new it hardly matters), he performs an act similar to Wolfe's.

Is this a more subtle point than I thought, or do you see what I mean and just disagree? I have no doubt Lepton would indeed make that argument, but my point is more or less that Lepton is an obtuse, pedantic moron.

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David Stockhoff — 19 Feb 2011, 19:42 · in reply to Fernando Gouvea

aha!

On 2/19/2011 1:11 PM, Fernando Gouvea wrote:

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Fernando

On 2/19/2011 11:27 AM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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Gerry Quinn — 20 Feb 2011, 01:17 · in reply to David Stockhoff

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

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No... we are the dawn men, or their close ancestors. Our descendants will colonise Mars in a few centuries. A little later, perhaps a thousand years from now, Jonas will set sail on a Korean starcrosser. It is our language that confuses 'present' and 'gift'.

Actually there is an interesting point regarding English and Latin I hadn't noticed before. Thea says "When the dawn men went to red Verthandi, which was then called War", she is in a sense conflating English and Latin (our versions), because Mars is the Roman god of War, and thus could be taken as Latin.

All this means is that she is talking about the very distant past - English and Latin are very close together from the perspective of Severian's time. What Wolfe transcribes as Latin is, I think, something much closer to Severian's time than our dawn languages.

Incidentally, there seems to be a slight language inconsistency in that Severian does not find Typhon's language archaic, or at least he does not mention it. Yet Typhon lived something between 350 and 2000 years before Severian's time (depending on whether the Whorl travelled at relativistic speeds or not). One would expect considerable changes, even in a culturally fossilised society.

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David Stockhoff — 20 Feb 2011, 01:52 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 2/19/2011 8:17 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "David Stockhoff" <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

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I guess then I will stay out of physics, and hope that he stays out of book discussions!

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Sorry, I had a 2-year-old on my lap when I wrote that. I meant to say, the language of the dawn men is certainly that language. We are the dawn men.

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Perhaps a language that is used to rule several worlds lasts longer than Latin, which ruled only part of one. But yes, Severian or his translator appears to have glossed over that. Typhon should have had some unimaginable archaic accent.

On 2/19/2011 6:27 AM, David Stockhoff wrote:
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Is it necessarily a single dead language? Perhaps Sev recorded the translations rather than the originals.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

Jeff Wilson — 20 Feb 2011, 02:40 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 2/19/2011 11:59 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:
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Gerry Quinn — 20 Feb 2011, 03:06 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

From: "Jeff Wilson" <jwilson at io.com>
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David Stockhoff — 20 Feb 2011, 03:07 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On 2/19/2011 9:34 PM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

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According to Fernando, the "gift" pun is common to several languages anyway.

Jeff Wilson — 20 Feb 2011, 04:24 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 2/19/2011 9:06 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

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That's what I mean; the Latin mottoes become traditional inscriptions for sundials and are copied (with errors creeping in) on new sundials in ages yet to come, like the Roman numerals on our contemporary clock faces, which often include both IIII and IX for extra anachroistic flavor.

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Jeff Wilson — 20 Feb 2011, 04:35 · in reply to Fernando Gouvea

On 2/19/2011 12:11 PM, Fernando Gouvea wrote:

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Could you give me a Portuguese example? En Espan~ol, "ahora" means now, and "presente" means here. This is also the case in literal English; "the present" is short for "the present moment", "the present time", "the present day", "the present situation", and other intangibles that present themselves the way a person would present a gift to another person.

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I brought this up last year, particularly with Typhon failing to correct Sev on Autarch instead of Monarch.

However, given the vast numbers of speaking and listening devices apparently still functional in the House and the Citadel, it is possible that they create philological inertia; aristocratic accents command machinery, eclectic accents don't. In Severian's case, the apprentices sleep in the highest floors of the tower adjacent to the chattering computers and communicators, and likely stand watches there as well.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

David Stockhoff — 20 Feb 2011, 13:18 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On 2/19/2011 11:47 PM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 2/19/2011 7:52 PM, David Stockhoff wrote:

On 2/19/2011 8:17 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

Incidentally, there seems to be a slight language inconsistency in that Severian does not find Typhon's language archaic, or at least he does not mention it. Yet Typhon lived something between 350 and 2000 years before Severian's time (depending on whether the Whorl travelled at relativistic speeds or not). One would expect considerable changes, even in a culturally fossilised society.

Perhaps a language that is used to rule several worlds lasts longer than Latin, which ruled only part of one. But yes, Severian or his translator appears to have glossed over that. Typhon should have had some unimaginable archaic accent.

I brought this up last year, particularly with Typhon failing to correct Sev on Autarch instead of Monarch.

However, given the vast numbers of speaking and listening devices apparently still functional in the House and the Citadel, it is possible that they create philological inertia; aristocratic accents command machinery, eclectic accents don't. In Severian's case, the apprentices sleep in the highest floors of the tower adjacent to the chattering computers and communicators, and likely stand watches there as well.

That's a good point. And any kind of social inertia is fitting for the Commonwealth---especially so when we know the author has projected about 20,000 years between our English and Severian's language.

Fernando Gouvea — 20 Feb 2011, 13:27 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

"Presente" as in present tense is the most obvious example. Of course there's also "agora", but "now" is not really a synonym of "present" in English either. It does derive from "the moment that presents itself", of course.

Fernando

On 2/19/2011 11:35 PM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 2/19/2011 12:11 PM, Fernando Gouvea wrote:

The same pun works in Portuguese, and probably in many other languages derived from Latin.

Could you give me a Portuguese example? En Espan~ol, "ahora" means now, and "presente" means here. This is also the case in literal English; "the present" is short for "the present moment", "the present time", "the present day", "the present situation", and other intangibles that present themselves the way a person would present a gift to another person.

=====

Fernando Q. Gouvea <http://www.colby.edu/~fqgouvea>
Carter Professor of Mathematics
Colby College
5836 Mayflower Hill Editor, MAA Reviews
Waterville, ME 04901 <http://www.maa.org/maareviews>

Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down an open manhole cover and die.
-- Mel Brooks

Ant3nio Pedro Marques — 21 Feb 2011, 01:38 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote:

I don't see what is ambiguous about "he was the smallest of those dead"
- but then again I don't remember the context

He was (the smallest of (those dead))

He was (the smallest of those [something] (dead))

Can't remember either.

Ant3nio Pedro Marques — 21 Feb 2011, 01:42 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote:

I other words I think:

<Terminus Est> : <Sev's language> :: Latin : English
<language Thea mentions> : <Sev's language> :: <really ancient language>
: English

I suppose : means 'is to', :: means 'as' and <> are just parentheses? If so, it took me a while to figure it out. I would suggest avoiding >.

The language Thea mentions is clearly present-day English. So the timeline is like:

<really ancient language> (not mentioned)

<Latin> (not mentioned)
<English> (referenced by Thea)

<'Terminus Est' language> (translated to Latin by Gene Wolfe)
<Severian's language> (translated to English by Gene Wolfe)

António Pedro Marques — 21 Feb 2011, 01:58 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 2/19/2011 12:11 PM, Fernando Gouvea wrote:

The same pun works in Portuguese, and probably in many other languages derived from Latin.

Could you give me a Portuguese example? En Espan~ol, "ahora" means now, and "presente" means here. This is also the case in literal English; "the present" is short for "the present moment", "the present time", "the present day", "the present situation", and other intangibles that present themselves the way a person would present a gift to another person.

Sorry, I don't get what you mean. The words, as used, are:

en now present time given present current place pt agora momento presente presente dado
presente local es ahora momento presente presente dado presente local

Praesens/praesentis is the present (:g) participle of praeesse, prae + esse, 'in-front be'. So 'present' is that which stands in front of you - not at a distance, but directly in your nose. Thus the temporal, spatial, exchangeal and other usages are all the same, but not one derives from any other, as seems to be suggested.

There's the interesting french word ceans which means 'this place'. So _la Cour de Ceans_ means 'the local Court', _la plus belle de ceans_ (funny song) is 'the most beautiful girl around'.

Gerry Quinn — 21 Feb 2011, 13:05 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

From: "Ant?nio Pedro Marques" <antonio at gmail.com>

Gerry Quinn wrote:

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If so, it took me a while to figure it out.

I would suggest avoiding >.

There is, or used to be, a mathematical notation that says:

$a : b :: c : d$

meaning

a is to b as c is to d.

It is used originally for ratios, and by analogy for comparisons, synonyms etc.

I used <> to differentiate multiword concepts; I often use angle brackets to differentiate some unitary thing from surrounding text but perhaps I should rethink if it is not coming across as such.

So yes, you got it right. I'll try to be clearer in the future.

- Gerry Quinn

António Pedro Marques — 21 Feb 2011, 13:25 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote (21-02-2011 13:05):

From: "Ant?nio Pedro Marques" <antonio at gmail.com>

Gerry Quinn wrote:

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: English

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meaning

a is to b as c is to d.

It is used originally for ratios, and by analogy for comparisons, synonyms etc.

I was only used to the simpletonish

a c

--- = ---

b d

I suppose :: is historically related to =, then.

I used <> to differentiate multiword concepts; I often use angle brackets to differentiate some unitary thing from surrounding text but perhaps I should rethink if it is not coming across as such.

No, there's nothing wrong with it; it's just that > is prone to be interpreted as a quoting character by the software.

So yes, you got it right. I'll try to be clearer in the future.

I'd probably have gotten it easily if my reader hadn't split the lines.