

Constructing Linguistic Reality: The Yggur Language  
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Abstract:

The Czech writer Michal Ajvaz presents the mysterious “Yggur” language in a fragment of an unfinished fantasy story by a deceased mathematician embedded in his novel *Lucemburská zahrada*. In addition to several pages of dialog written in Yggur, the novel contains some glosses and a partial grammar sketch of the language allegedly found by the mathematician’s widow scribbled on the backs of receipts, flyers, and pizza boxes. Although these materials are incomplete, it is possible to decipher about 90% of the text written in Yggur and sort out its structure.

The present study examines Yggur as a linguistic object, showing that it behaves remarkably like a full-fledged language. This is achieved by analyzing the phonology, morphology (including inflection, derivation, and compounding), syntax and lexicon of the language. Additional comparisons with “real” languages are also brought to bear, such as the Zipfian (1949) distribution of words in the 632-word corpus of dialog, types of linguistic categories represented, as well as the presence of syncretism and morphological ambiguity. It can be argued that Ajvaz has created, in miniature, a fully functional language that could well survive as a vehicle of human communication if only it had some speakers. This design and implementation of a constructed language is striking in that it deviates from the constructed languages usually found in fiction, which tend to contain features that are unknown in natural human languages (Conley & Cain 2006). In a very real sense, Ajvaz has constructed a linguistic reality in this novel.

Ajvaz, Michal. 2011. *Lucemburská zahrada*. Brno: Druhé město.

Conley, Tim & Stephen Cain. 2006. *Encyclopedia of Fictional and Fantastic Languages*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

Zipf, G 1949. *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort*. New York: Addison-Wesley.

Rogatchevski: A Fictional Language in Fiction: The Case of Yggurština  
*Lucemburská zahrada* (2011) by Michal Ajvaz is a philosophical novel disguised as a sci-fi. Adopting Plotinus’s concept of all-encompassing yet imperceptible primary substance called The One (ἐν), Ajvaz makes his central characters, Paul and Claire, aware of this substance, with different consequences. The novel suggests that, every now and then, life sends us a coded message about The One, and if we decode this message, at least in part, it may change our existence dramatically.

The One is symbolically represented by Yggur (*yggurština*), spoken by extraterrestrials in a novel by a fictitious American author, whose work Paul comes across by chance. The content of Yggur fragments can be translated by recourse to the incomplete notes on Yggur’s grammar and vocabulary. Yggur is a manifestation of the world’s invisible but omnipresent structure, termed ‘cosmic grammar’ (Ajvaz 2011: 51). The reader is invited to participate in the symbolic act of deciphering the Yggur passages, and thus dipping into The One.

Yggur therefore fulfills a dual function of 1) “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin 1979/2016), necessary to create a convincing picture of an unknown entity, and 2) a cognitive process of familiarizing oneself with this entity, in an attempt to “control <...> (or influence <...>) the uncontrollable” (to use Tolkien’s description of constructing a fictional language, see Tolkien 1931/1983: 198). However, *Lucemburská zahrada* can be appreciated even without learning Yggur. It is not coincidental that the first Yggur word we encounter, „okitubis“, is never explained. After all, certain things may well remain incomprehensible forever.

Ajvaz, Michal (2011). *Lucemburská zahrada*. Brno: Druhé město.

Suvin, Darko (1979/2016). *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Tolkien, JRR (1931/1983). ‘A Secret Vice’, in his *The Monsters and the Critics*. London: Allen&Unwin, 198-223.