

Creating new technological terms is similar to writing poetry or to breeding salmon at a fish farm

After All

by Vitali Vladimirsen



TERMINOLOGY

BREEDING WORDS FOR TECHNOLOGY IN THE FAROE ISLANDS

A Faroese *telda*, with a *skiggi* and a *flöga*



THE APPEARANCE of a new technology is normally followed by the birth of a new word to describe it. I remember heated debates a few years ago about the word 'podcast', with some conservative linguists asserting it would never get absorbed into the language of Shakespeare, Dickens and Nicci French.

Every year, the *Oxford English Dictionary* gets enriched (or damaged, as some believe) with several new technology terms, 2011's additions being 're-tweet' (meaning 'tweet again'); 'sexting' (sending sexually explicit text messages) and 'cyberbullying' (fairly self-explanatory).

We are lucky to be operating in a language that doubles as the international science and technology *lingua franca*, so there's no need to adjust new technological terms for our everyday use for most of them are coined in English in the first place. In other countries, however, it is a different matter.

Whereas Germany and France simply use the same English terms but heavily accented, in Russia most new techno words are transliterated (i.e. phonetically copied) from their English counterparts – the phenomenon

that led to the birth of such linguistic mongrels as '*kliknut*' – to click: '*disketa*' – compact disc, and '*mobil'nik*' – mobile phone.

For a linguistic purist like myself, such words are tantamount to physical mutilation of the language, which, in most cases, is capable of supplying its own suitable equivalents. For example, my late father, a nuclear physicist, who worked with first-generation Soviet computers, initially referred to them as '*vichislitel'niye mashini*' – calculating machines – a tongue-breaking term that nevertheless conveyed the meaning of the word well without sounding alien for "Russian-speaking ears". Some years later, he too succumbed to the growing 'Anglicisation' trend and started using the 'cool' foreign word "*komp'yuter*" instead.

There is one tiny nation that has managed to resist the Anglo-American linguistic onslaught: the Faroe Islands. One of the highlights of my visit to this self-governing Danish dependency of 18 barren volcanic islands in the North Atlantic some years ago was meeting Professor Johan Hendrik W Poulsen,

the country's leading linguist. His small office at Faroes University in Torshavn could be best compared to a salmon-breeding farm. Only, instead of fish, he bred new Faroese words.

The ancient Faroese language, a derivative from old Norse and west Norwegian, was practically banned on the islands until 1938, and the only permitted official tongue was Danish.

Until 1890, there was no literature in Faroese – a dynamic, poetic and melodious sister-language of Icelandic with some Celtic. The tiny nation now boasts eight (!) national daily newspapers in Faroese. Another amazing side of modern Faroese culture is the number of books (nearly 200 titles a year) written in the native language or translated.

"Yes, our language can accommodate hexameters," smiled Professor Poulsen, who was also a member of the Faroes Committee for the Protection of the Language.

"Some time ago, we introduced a parliamentary bill to protect our names," he said. "Unless the committee decides otherwise, any child born on the islands has to be given a Faroese name."

That might sound a bit harsh, but the Faroese did have a point: their beautiful language had to be revived after five centuries of Danish domination.

The biggest linguistic problem faced by the Faroese in trying to turn their old spoken tongue into a language of literature and science was the absence of the words for technological terms and such modern notions as 'television', 'computer', 'hard-drive' and so on. And that was where Professor Poulsen's word-breeding farm came in.

Rather than using foreign borrowings, he decided to cultivate some genuine Faroese neologisms. "Words are like bubbles of air resting at the bottom of the ocean which can one day pop back up to the surface," he told me. Thus a computer became '*telda*', from *tal* (number); a computer screen '*skiggi*', from the sheep's stomach stretched across smoke-holes in traditional

Faroese houses to keep out the rain and let in light (predecessors of windows); the compact disc was '*flöga*', from round wooden pancakes put underneath haystacks.

"It took me a long time to find a proper Faroese word for a CD," Professor Poulsen confessed. "Creating new words is like spreading seeds: some fall on good soil, some on rock.

"My work is like that of a poet, only my poems consist of one word only," he said.

I remember thinking then that he was not just a poet, but a kind of a linguistic engineer too. What a joy and an honour it must be, engineering one's own language!

Having bid '*Farvæl*' to Professor Poulsen, I went to a nearby salmon farm.

"We have 106,379 young salmon in this cage," my guide told me proudly.

Come on, I thought sarcastically. Do you count them? "Are you sure?" I said, looking intently at the cage's wavy surface. "To me, it looks rather like 106,378..."

And then my guide, who was speaking in Faroese via an interpreter, said one word: "*Telda!*" – meaning it was not him, but a computer that not only counted, but also fed the fish!

His answer filled me with pride for two reasons: Firstly, I was pleasantly surprised with my sudden proficiency in Faroese, and secondly I was so happy that Professor Poulsen's linguistic creations were alive and well.

It takes me enormous pleasure to byline this column in Faroese, which doesn't have last names – only first names and patronymics. Since my father's first name was Vladimir, my own full name in Faroese would be Vitali Vladimirsen (i.e. Vitali, the son of Vladimir). My Dad would have liked that, I am sure... *

Any interesting foreign technology terms you'd like to share? Send them to vvitaliev@theiet.org Check out Vitali's latest book project at