



The Languages of Pao

Jack Vance

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The Panarch of Pao is dead and Beran Panasper, his young son and heir, must flee the planet to live and avenge his father's death. It is at the secret fortress on the planet Breakness that Beran discovers the dreaded truth behind the assassination of his father-and much more. The people of Pao are a docile lot, content to live in harmony with the rest of the cosmos, but the scientists at Breakness seek to alter the psychology of the Paonese for their own purpose-and Beran holds the key to their audacious plan. Beran will return to Pao, transforming his home world beyond his teacher's wildest dreams. But though he has been fashioned into a man of Breakness, Beran's heart is of Pao. And he brings to his world the seeds of change that will save Pao...or destroy it.

The Languages of Pao Details

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Author : Jack Vance

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From Reader Review The Languages of Pao for online ebook

Isaac says

This is Jack Vance for linguists.

The Languages of Pao features a whopping 7 (or maybe 8?) fictional languages. Vance goes in to great detail, and readers unfamiliar with language terminology will be utterly lost. "Paonese" in particular reminded me of Japanese, with its fondness of the passive voice and subjectless sentences. However, everything is in English in the book, so there is no heavy decoding expected of the reader. The nuances of the various languages are explained in dialogue, narrative exposition, and in Terry Pratchett-esque footnotes (or should I say Vance-esque, since Vance came first?).

Admittedly, the skeleton of the plot is disappointing. Any storyline involving a usurped prince fighting to regain his throne is going to get eyes rolling - my cliché detector went off big time! But, the plot structure develops in very unusual ways and is undeserving of scorn of readers.

As usual, Vance's prose is excellent, concise, dryly humorous. There are exotic locales, and vivid descriptions. The Science Fiction element is also very good. His inventiveness is brilliant and reminds me of the Dying Earth series in the magic-esque power of the technology in his future setting. In particular, I enjoyed the description of a tongue touch pad for computer inside the cheek of the mouth - something that I read was being developed for disabled people in the New Scientist magazine! Not bad for a novel written in 1958.

In conclusion, this is early Jack Vance at its near best. The characterisation is unsympathetic, and the plot skeleton is an overused one, but those are my only criticisms. The book is great Science Fiction.

Christy says

I have only two things to say about this book.

1. Vance's central contention, that language shapes culture, is a good one and worth exploring, which is what he does here. He writes, "Each language is a special tool, with a particular capability. It is more than a means of communication, it is a system of thought" (45). And he then goes on to illustrate the truth of this by showing how the political and cultural landscape of one planet, Pao, is altered by consciously and deliberately altering the language.

2. Aside from this point about language, there's little to be gained from this book. The plot is essentially *Hamlet* sans the introspection and the death of all the characters at the end. There is little character development, little innovation in plot, and little of stylistic interest. At least, for better or for worse, because of its familiarity and simplicity, it reads quickly.

Johnny says

Jack Vance! The more I read from him in my quest to discover this incredible author that I shamefully overlooked in my initial discovery of science-fiction, the more impressed I become. In other reviews, I have noted Vance's incredible creativity regarding the alien cultures he described. There is an incredible sensitivity to detail and implication in these fictional cultures that seems rare, even in the speculative realms of science-fiction. *The Languages of Pao* is no exception. I loved the normaloids (essentially bio-enhanced eunuchs to serve as official troops) in Paonese culture and the tapestry in the capitol of one planet which had been woven from the hair of everyone born into the ruling clan (p. 131).

But that wasn't the main course for this novel. *The Languages of Pao* conceives of a people who are so passive that they won't defend themselves under any circumstances. If their government wants to punish them, they are "subaqueated" (ie. "drowned"). The thesis is that the people are passive and conceive of themselves as nothing more than corks on the surface of the ocean (p. 6) because their language only describes situations with no verbs and no adjectives of comparison (p. 6). However, through the circumstances of the novel, three new languages are formed. One language introduces the kind of activity and comparison that the Paonese language lacked. Vance describes the new language as rich in gutturals and hard vowels, helping to mold a people with a very martial attitude (p. 59). The second new language would be complex, consistent and logical to shape a technological/scientific people (p. 59). See if you can guess what the third language did from the following description: "Theirs would be a symmetrical language with emphatic number parsing, elaborate honorifics to teach hypocrisy, a vocabulary rich in homophones to facilitate ambiguity, a syntax of reflection, reinforcement and alternation to emphasize the analogous interchange of human affairs." (p. 59) If you guessed that the third language was that of the traders and salesmen, you were correct.

The way these languages shape Paonese society into a military, technological, and economic class (and later, an academic, philosophical class) demonstrates the difficulty of legitimate social engineering and the challenge of developing an orderly society with emerging free will. *The Languages of Pao* is a rather relaxed story, despite the assassination attempts, betrayals, and "subaqueations" which take place. Its confrontations range from typical action-based confrontations to logic-based confrontations. Some of the events are clearly foreshadowed and some are unexpected (or unexpectedly repeated with different results). But when the culture is so efficiently engineered, what happens when the protagonist feels a "stew pot" of languages and society is better than the figurative separation of food on a plate? To me, it was fascinating!

Although it is unusual for this to happen, I found myself agreeing with the cover blurb of my DAW Books (1980 reprint of the 1958 novel) edition which closed with "...it's also one of Jack Vance's finest!"

Brian says

Here's the short review: if you're into sociology-porn, if the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is the sort of thing that gets you all hot and bothered, sure, look this one up. Otherwise, it's probably not worth your time.

The "hero" of the tale is Beran Panasper, whose father is Panarch of Pao. The Panarch is the absolute ruler of the world, and his rule is facilitated by the culture of Pao. The people of Pao number in the billions, and all share a unified culture. They dislike change and violence, and prefer conformity and stasis. Their idea of a national sport is to gather in huge crowds and perform "drones", chanting for hours in unison. When faced with adversity, the Paonese response is passive-aggressive. This makes it easy for the Panarch if, for instance, he has to murder a few million of his subjects in order to stave off an impending famine.

Beran's uncle decides he'd make a better Panarch than Beran's father, so he murders the current Panarch. The visiting techno-wizard Palafox spirits Beran away before he, too, can be murdered by his uncle, and hides him on the world of Breakness. Beran is enrolled in a course of education on Breakness while his uncle faces a passive-resistant revolt on Pao, and then invasion by a neighboring world of warriors. In desperation, he turns to Palafox for help.

The prescription suggested by Palafox is a remolding of the Paonese culture. Palafox designs a program to transform the Paonese from passive, bucolic serfs centered around changing their language. He creates three languages for Beran's uncle, and they set about using these languages to create three new cultures on Pao. One, speaking Valiant, are warriors who are eager to die for glory. Another language is created for engineers, which inspires them to build and design and improve. Finally, a third language aimed at cogitation and planning (and based on the language of Breakness) is introduced to inspire the creation of a supervisor caste. Entire populations are uprooted and moved around as territories are marked out where only the new languages are to be spoken. It's impossible to read about this massive social engineering program and not think of the Cultural Revolution. And, indeed, millions are displaced and hundreds of thousands die in the chaos the results. Beran hears about these horrors and, as the rightful Panarch, feels some obligation to "set things right", which, to his mind, means returning things back to the way they were. Thus begins a three-way conflict between Beran, his uncle, and Palafox, who has his own megalomaniacal plans for the Paonese.

Now, I suppose we're supposed to root for Beran because he's the viewpoint character, but really, he's extremely hard to like. The fact that he wants to be an absolute tyrant over a world of listless ciphers hardly makes him loveable. You can't root for his uncle because, in addition to being a murderer, he's singularly incompetent, and behaves stupidly throughout the book. And Palafox is a manipulative bastard. If the book wallowed in the wickedness of the characters, that might have been a fun read, something like a sci-fi sociology-porn version of Karl Wagner's *Dark Crusade*. Unfortunately, I was never quite able to dislodge the feeling that Beran was, in fact, meant to be a hero, and not an anti-hero. Maybe I'm dense and missed the intended satire? As our three main characters clashed in their attempts at social engineering on a grand scale, the primary emotion I felt was tepid revulsion at their banally vile behavior.

So I really can't recommend this book, unless the idea of using language as a tool in massive social-engineering projects tickles your fancy. Otherwise, there's little here to enjoy in *The Languages of Pao*.

Canavan says

☆☆☆

Bob Offer-Westort says

I have a thing for linguistics- or languages-oriented sci-fi, & my interest led me to Vance's novel—the only of his that I've yet read. The great majority of linguistic sci-fi is oriented toward a popular version of what gets called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, & Vance's book is—now—fairly run-of-the-mill in this regard, tho it's an early effort in this direction. Perhaps in its time the central idea would have seemed novel (tho Vance did have precursors—probably most famously 1984). But the treatment is superficial & uninformed—even given the knowledge of language available at the time—& much less interesting than any other such novel I've yet come across.

The linguistic concept at issue is this: Perhaps the lexical & grammatical structure of the language we speak has a significant impact on how we are able to perceive—& thus engage—the world.

In Vance's planet Pao, the fifteen billion residents are very nearly homogenous, & speak one language which—comprised entirely of noun phrases, void of the dynamism of verbs or the differentiation of adjectives—leads to a passive populace, content to serve a dynasty of autocrats, provided that the ruler doesn't shake things up any. (Because they're so passive, the Paonese won't revolt against an unsuitable Panarch: They'll just drag their feet.) An assassination & ensuing political intrigue lead to the introduction of four new languages to selected ranks of Paonese. Three of these languages are specially designed to change the speakers' character, such that those assigned to the new military are more competitive; those assigned to technological development are unemotional & have greater precision of thought. The fourth language, Pastiche, is a pidgin of the three artificial languages & Paonese, developed recreationally by the new class of translators as they're trained in the introduced languages.

& that's it, really. The rest of the novel is political intrigue, but in a world in which the dynamics are not sufficiently thought-thru or fleshed out to make the intrigue intriguing. It might be an exaggeration to call the characters flat, but their characterisations are weak & unmemorable.

I haven't got much else to say. This book is bad.

Lyn says

SF Grandmaster Jack Vance first published *Languages of Pao* in 1957, during the Cold War and this political climate serves as a behind the scenes guide to the message Vance imparts.

Vance possesses one of the most gifted and subtle sense of dry humor amongst any group of writers, but this book made me think he is akin to Kurt Vonnegut in that regard. This novel contains Vonnegutesque humor, like a Kilgore Trout fantasy, that is almost Seussian in it's simplicity yet pregnant with allegory and double meaning. Like Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*, *The Languages of Pao* features a power play that is unreliable as the action goes in different, non-formulaic directions.

I give high praise for originality and Vance here demonstrates his unparalleled imagination. On a planet that is a caricature of moderation, compliance and passivity, the introduction of a likewise absurdly extreme culture of individuality and solipsism presents a unique exploration of sociological and cultural elements.

I read recently that Vance was best friends with fellow speculative fiction writers Poul Anderson and Frank Herbert. This, of course, made me like him all the more. Whereas Vance fantasies like *The Dying Earth* and *Suldrun's Garden* resemble Anderson's work, this is more like Frank Herbert. Elaborate and byzantine world building and complex, multi-layered characterization with a deep backstory are themes in which both writers excel.

A cerebral and inventive SF gem.

mark monday says

if a world can be described in a word, then the word for Pao is *passive*. language has helped make the Paonese content but also ill-equipped to handle invasion and other forms of aggression.

the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis posits that "the structure of a language affects the ways in which its respective speakers conceptualize their world... or otherwise influences their cognitive processes" (thank you, Wikipedia)... linguistic relativity can mean that the way different cultures talk impacts how different cultures act. or as the character Finisterle notes: "every language impresses a certain world-view upon the mind."

this is the chilliest Jack Vance novel that I've read to date. all of the Vancean virtues are present - sly, almost subliminal wit; elegant prose; absorbing world-building; an illustration of how easily monstrous egos can blossom into actual monstrosity - but Vance seems disinterested in providing a way for the reader to connect with the story on anything except a purely intellectual level. I am the sort of under-evolved reader who needs an emotional connection for me to truly enjoy a work. there is much to fascinate within its pages. but the bland protagonist, the casual and vague handling of a pact that includes sex slaves to be exported, a narrative full of suspense that lacks much narrative drive, and especially a debilitating ending that illustrates the need to give in to physical force... all of that contributed to a detachment I felt throughout the experience. this is not a bad book by any means and there is much that provided food for thought. it has a cerebral quality that makes it in some ways a superior book to other, more shallow Jack Vance adventures. overall I liked it. but it is perhaps the first book by the author that I am disinclined to ever read a second time.

Fantasy Literature says

Jack Vance is known as a master stylist who, at his best, has an exquisite way with the written English language, a tribute in many ways to his idols P.G. Wodehouse and the unjustly forgotten Jeffery Farnol, among others, but Vance is also a writer of thought-provoking and unique ideas. The Languages of Pao is Vance at the top of his game as far as exploring unusual concepts. The premise of the story is based on a theory known as "Linguistic Relativity" or the "Sapir–Whorf hypothesis" and in layman's terms it basically means that the language a person speaks shapes human thought patterns and behavior, in both individuals and societies. Vance has here taken the theory to its logical extreme conclusion in a far future time, where a group of "wizards" use the method to attempt to change the mindset of an entire planet to suit their own agenda.

Young Beran Penasper is heir to... Read More:
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TJ says

The Languages of Pao is an early, interesting novel by Jack Vance written in 1956 and first published in December 1957 in an abbreviated version in the magazine Satellite Science Fiction. Avalon Press issued it as a hardcover book in 1958. It is currently in print in a very nice, 166 page, trade paperback edition by Spatterlight Press.

How much does our language shape our cognitions, behavior and even sensory perceptions? Can changing a language dramatically alter a society? As one of the characters in this novel states, "Language controls the mechanism of your mind. When people speak different languages, their minds work differently and they act differently." In The Languages of Pao, Vance explores such psycholinguistic and semantic issues, especially the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis."

The people on the planet Pao are very docile and resistant to change but hard working. They are taken advantage of by inhabitants from other planets that have a strong military or experienced traders with fleets

of ships. The ruler of Pao, the Panarch Aiello Panasper wants to create a military so he will not have to pay tribute to those from other planets. He also wants to develop direct trade so the Pao are not constantly cheated by the Mercantil who have all of the merchant spaceships and a monopoly on all interplanetary trade. In order to create weapons and merchant ships he needs technology, something the Pao are painfully lacking.

Panasper, makes arrangements to consult with a leader from the Breakness planet but is assassinated by his brother, Bustamonte. The son of the deceased Panarch, Beran Panasper, is next in line but must go into hiding to avoid being killed by his uncle Bustamonte. He is sheltered by Lord Palafox from the Breakness Institute on the planet Breakness. This is the same person who was contacted to be a consultant by the Panarch before he was assassinated. Bustamonte continues his brother's plan to consult with Palafox to try to change their society. Palafox informs Bustamonte that this can be done but that, "We must alter the mental framework of the Paonese people, which is most easily achieved by altering the language." Thus begins a massive social experiment that dramatically alters Pao society. In the meantime Beran remains on Breakness and studies their language and culture while hoping he will not be assassinated by Uncle Bustamonte.

Millions of Pao citizens are displaced and land is confiscated to set up three different centers, one for the military (Valiants), another for technical research and production (Technicants) and a third for trade (Cogitants). Over many years each group is taught a different language created to favor their specialty. "To the military segment, a 'successful man' will be synonymous with 'winner' of fierce contest. To the industrialist it will mean 'efficient fabricator.' To the traders, it equates with 'a person irresistibly persuasive'." In addition to the three technical languages a mixed language called Pastiche develops.

Pao is able to develop a strong military, an industrial base and merchant trade but there are consequences so that much of the population is isolated from the three elite groups and is unhappy. Each group (Valiant, Technicant and Cogitant) speaks only its own language and not the common Paonese language or Pastiche so they need interpreters to communicate with each other and the general population. And the ordinary, displaced Pao citizen who is not one of these three elite groups seems to be left out of the picture. How can the Pao maintain most of the advantages of this tremendous social experiment while improving things for the average Paonese.

There is much more to the plot. Beran wants to topple his uncle to become the new Panarch since he is the rightful heir. Palafox develops an elaborate scheme to obtain indentured Paonese woman with whom he breeds, attempting to populate all planets with his offspring. Palafox also has very powerful weapons and abilities that are implanted in him so that he is something of a Robocop. He implants some of these in Beran whom he supports as a possible successor to Bustamonte if Bustamonte becomes too independent or uncooperative. The Brumbo warrior clan from the planet Batmarsh continues to visit Pao to demand tribute to avoid invasion and destruction. This clan also orders the Paonese to abandon their merchant fleet and trade with other planets, something that will ruin the Pao economy and increasing independence. Palafox in the meantime makes it clear that he has no sense of ethics or honor and will do whatever it takes to promote his own advantage. He outdoes Machiavelli. Beran cannot really trust him because Palafox and his group are totally self serving and have no conscience or sense of morality.

This is a novel of ideas with the plot and characters being of secondary importance. I have loved semantics ever since I began reading S.I. Hayakawa, IA Richards and others back in the 1960s and am familiar with the Sapir -Whorf hypothesis so was excited to read this book the first time I did so. But a mere 157 pages does not allow for the epic depiction of such social and psychological changes and the main ideas can only be briefly sketched. Vance gives it a good try, though, and the book is easy to read, engaging and thought provoking.

The Languages of Pao is recommended to all Vance fans and to any readers who are interested in the connection between language, behavior, cognition, perception and culture. As far as I know it is the only

science fiction novel to ever focus on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. I liked this novel somewhat better the second time I read it. No doubt I'll be reading it a third time in another year or two. It is not one of Vance's very finest novels but is interesting. My rating: 4-.

Justin Howe says

I can't help but read this as "The Languages of POW!".

Vance has fun in this novel playing with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, but really that's the side attraction to the usual Vancian loopiness where everything important gets done with "punctilio". Also present are the standard "elite of amoral supermen" that were so popular in 1950s SF. Vance deflates his supermen, making them rather silly, kind of like Gandalf by way of Hugh Hefner. (I'd posit that Hugh Hefner was a huge influence on 1950s and 60s SF.) Also short. Have I mentioned how much I miss the 50,000 word novel?

Metaphorosis says

I first read this book a long time ago. It was my first exposure to the idea that language shapes not just how one says things, but what it is possible to say and think. I was tremendously impressed.

Vance takes that idea, and runs with it. While I wouldn't say that this is a complete examination of the concept, he does apply it with a certain amount of rigor, and the result is striking.

The setting is typically Vancian, if a bit less overt than usual, and a little more on the adventurous side. Women barely get a look in, and the one woman who does is to some extent a loose thread.

I didn't like the book as much this time around, but I've left the rating untouched because of its initial impact, and because it's one of the few examples of Vance preferring concept over mood and setting.

All that sounds a bit gloomy, but the fact is I thought this book was tremendously powerful on first read, with a concept that I thought about for years. Beyond that, it's a well-written Vancian adventure, and that's always worth reading. Recommended.

CVIE V

Ian Cunningham says

Sometimes I think Jack Vance couldn't write a truly bad story if he tried. A bog-standard 'prince is exiled, prince is raised by evil wizard, prince returns to his kingdom, and after some setback, defeats evil wizard' plot combined with a science fiction hook of "what if the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is correct?" should not result in such a breezy, fun read. This is a three-star book if you're not a linguistics nerd nor apt to view no-to-low alien settings through a Warhammer 40,000 lens, and a two-star book if you're NOT enchanted by Vance's style, but I can't for the life of me figure out why this book has been out of print for so long. It's fun, intelligent pulp, just like the doctor ordered.

Joe Santoro says

At first glance, there's not a huge amount to this book.. the plot is pretty basic... displaced royal son has to learn the ways of the world to reclaim his birthright. There's alot going on underneath, though. Considering when it was written, I think you could definitely take the stoic, communal, rustic Paos as Soviet Communism taking to the extreme, and the 'wizards' (really cyborgs) of Breakness and their hyper individualists as American Capitalism to the opposite one.

That the Paoese where the good guys makes me wonder if Mr. Vance got a call from Joe McCarthy at some point. The language thing was pretty interesting, his theory being that the language of a society is part of it's nature, and is part of the brain's development, then puts that theory into practice in the story. I'm not sure I believe it, but it made sense and made for a pretty interesting story.

Marc Nash says

Not the best plotted novel in the world, - time is really ill-disciplined within the book, jumping a year in the course of a paragraph, but still lots of fascinating ideas on show here. A series of planets with variations of humans who have developed their society according to the flexibility or constrictions of their various languages. The society in focus here, Pao, is very conservative, does not embrace change, accepts its fate phlegmatically, what you'd call passive-aggressive probably. The introduction of new languages by another planet for its own benefit, leads to the development of military, technocratic and merchant classes where none existed before. Really interesting stuff.

Video review https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9_QJ...
