LET'S HAVE A TALK

A word to the wise.

BY XIA JIA (EDITED BY KEN LIU)

There are few reasons to call a linguist after midnight.

It was three in the morning when the phone woke me. A gloomy voice said they needed me right now. My first response was: *Uh-oh, they're finally here. Aliens.*

I met with some odd people in an odd dark room, where we watched odd video clips: a flock of white seal pups huddled together, clamouring continuously, sounding vaguely like a zoo mixed with a parking garage and a kindergarten.

"What the hell is that?" Someone beat me to the question.

We listened to the explanation. A lab designed these intelligent toys, which could imitate and learn human languages from scratch, as newborn babies do. The design summary claimed that the seal pups could ultimately master the equivalent of a five-year-old's language skills.

The lab staff had packed a hundred prototypes in a container to be shipped to beta users; however, the container was mislabelled. When the container was finally tracked down, retrieved and opened, the staff found that the seals, which ought to have been powered down and lying on their bellies silently, were instead making an astonishing ruckus.

"It looks like they are talking with each other in some alien language we can't understand," an incredulous voice penetrated the darkness.

"That is the very thing we must figure out." A man in black, who was leading this midnight meeting, nodded at us, poker-faced. "Is that possible? Who taught them? Remember, the container was sealed the entire time."

"Sealed seals," I murmured. Luckily no one heard me.

"There was a similar case. ISN, Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua," the voice in the darkness replied. "It's a sign language developed by deaf children in a number of schools in western Nicaragua in the 1970s and 1980s."

"Tell me more."

Evidently the man in black found this interesting.

"Well, before the

1970s, there was no deaf community in Nicaragua. Then a couple of vocational schools were established there and hundreds of deaf students enrolled. The language programme, which tried to teach students to lip-read Spanish words, initially achieved little success. Meanwhile, the schoolyard,

the street and the school bus proved to be fertile testing grounds for students figuring out how to communicate with each other on their own. By combining gestures and elements of their individual, idiosyncratic, homegrown sign systems, a new type of sign language rapidly emerged, which is now known as Idioma de Señas de Nicaragua. It is the only time that we've actually seen a language being created out of thin air."

"Not exactly," another voice interrupted. "Actually, someone later created robots with an ability to develop their own language. These 'Lingodroids' were designed to navigate their way through a labyrinth and to create words for mapped locations using a database of syllables. They communicated their findings to each other with microphones and speakers, thereby spawning new words for direction and distance as well."

"How do we know what the Lingodroids were talking about?" said a third voice. "Isn't it possible that a word that sounds innocuous could mean, for example, 'armed revolt'?"

The idea of those simple robots conspiring should have been funny, but none of us laughed.

"Any more ideas?" The man in black looked around.

"Why seal pups?" I asked loudly.

"What?"

"They look weird. Why couldn't you have

chosen puppies or kittens?"

"I don't think that's important." He shrugged.

"Maybe the designer wanted them to appear as timid and inoffensive as possible," I mused. "Doesn't this imply that we fear talking creatures unconsciously?"

"What's your point?"

"I mean, why don't we turn off this video screen, walk out of this dark room, and talk with these ... things directly, as we believe they've already developed their own language? All linguists know that the only way to learn an unknown language is to communicate with a native speaker, to point at objects and ask questions, and to answer their questions as well. We certainly will never understand what they are talking about if we don't knock on the door of that sealed container and say hello first."

I stepped through the door, and all the seal pups fell silent and watched me with their big crystal eyes. *Thank God. Seal pups seem much better than creatures with teeth and claws.* I extended both of my hands to show that there was no hidden weapon, just as I was trained to do in my first field practice, knowing full well that this gesture was probably meaningless in their linguistic system.

A ROBOT MAY NOT INJURE A HUMAN BEING, ALTHOUGH IT MUST PROTECT ITS OWN EXISTENCE.

So high, so low, so many things to know.

"你好。" I said hello in my mother tongue, and waited patiently.

The nearest seal pup put a fluffy paw in my flat palm, and spoke — it sounded like a great big yawn.

I tried my best to imitate it. I could be saying hello, or else just yawning. Anyway it was not a bad start.

"让我们说说话?" I asked gently. Let's have a talk, shall we? ■

Xia Jia is a sci-fi writer in China. Her fiction has appeared in English translation in venues such as *Clarkesworld* and *The Year's Best SF*. This is her first story written in English and was edited by **Ken Liu**, a translator and speculative-fiction author whose works have appeared in *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Tor.com* and other venues.

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