

## Do you speak Jive?

*"Je parle le francais, mais je ne comprende pas."  
- Woody Allen, on tour in France*

As the travel agents tell you, travelling by wormhole portal isn't dangerous these days. In fact it is by far the safest form of transport around. Statistically, you're more likely to get hit by a car on the way to the portal-caster, or have an accident in your own home. In fact, more people die putting on *their own trousers*<sup>1</sup> than from mis-ports - seriously. The waiver you sign is just a formality. Plus wormhole portals are fast and cheap, and you can see/gland places your parents/progenitors never dreamed of. But none of this was any consolation to Archibald Thondril, Professor of Linguistics at Jersey University, when his routine port to Tau Ceti III went awry.

Mofostyle-spin-jack-baby. Dark-blue-becoming. Beaucoup mega-sombre-chill.

He'd punched in his ticket at the London-Euston portal on Earth, just as he'd done dozens of times before. But instead of arriving in the reception zone of the conference centre, he was unceremoniously dumped on a deserted beach in the middle of god-knows-where. He had heard of mis-ports of course. People stepped through wormhole portals and vanished never to be found. Ported into outer space to die screaming silent into the vacuum. He was lucky that with the modern safeguards one was guaranteed to port onto land. This might be a false blessing though - saved from aphysixiation only to starve to death slowly on an inhospitable alien rock. The potential horror of his situation hit home. This planet might not be instantly fatal, but the danger of him dying here, unknown and alone, was frighteningly real. They would know of course that he had mis-ported, but that didn't mean they could find him. Vague recollections came to him of quantum no-cloning rules and other small print gobbledegook. The wormhole that carried him here was gone, collapsed into the quantum ether, and nothing could trace where it had been. He was lost, stranded, marooned. The professor sank to his knees and cried into the sand, sobbing. His suitcase stood beside him like an absurd gravestone.

Heavy-boogie-shit. Every-no-down-fly-like. Spam-mother-baby. Spam-fuck-the-mother.

How long he knelt like that he did not know. It was the tide coming in that roused him. The soft cold waves soothed him as they splashed over his hands and legs. Standing up, he now surveyed the beach properly for the first time. It was empty; yellow sand dunes stretched up to a thick green forest that looked possibly Terran in origin. He allowed himself to hope a little. At the border where the forest met the sand, a small pre-fab hut looked over the beach. It was in good repair, so this was a populated planet, thank god. Picking up his suitcase, he went to investigate the hut. It was empty; just a shell for picnickers or campers to stop in, but there was a path leading away through the forest. He looked at it a long time before setting off. There was really no choice, but the simple track leading into the unknown jungle filled him with fear. Eventually he set off, the taste of fear strong in his mouth.

Several hours later and the walk had become monotonous and tiring. His feet hurt, his suit was wet with moisture and sweat whilst his throat was dry. Clinging to the suitcase like a lifeline, he trudged on. Abruptly he halted. There were noises coming from up the path. Noises that sounded human.

A flamboyantly dressed young couple rounded the corner chatting amiably. They ground to a halt on seeing Thondril's bedraggled form. The three humans stood still and silent, regarding each other with

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics are not available for deaths from putting on other people's trousers.

quizzical eyes.

"Hello?" Thondril ventured.

"Ola! Slap-low-very-honky." the man replied. His tone seemed friendly enough with a touch of concern. The professional linguist in Thondril was immediately struck by their rhythmic way of speaking, and this would later lead him to name the language 'Jive'.

Human and non-violent, Thondril thought. Also judging by the cut of their clothes this was not a degenerate colony. This disaster no longer looked quite so bad. Thondril smiled at them and waited for the automatic translator he wore to make sense of their speech. Instead it emitted a small error beep. This merely meant their language wasn't one of the top 1,000 languages stored in the device. However the translator was capable of learning new tongues. All he needed was to let it listen in on enough of the natives chatter and it would automatically pick up on the patterns in their speech. It would take a while - perhaps a few days - but there were very few languages that the machine couldn't decipher. Moreover those were either non-vocal or so alien as to defy any translation, such as the storm-singers of Crab Nebula VII who *were* the language.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." Thondril said with polite smile of incomprehension, "Do you speak Terran? "

The man nodded amiably, but that might mean anything. "Whip-smooth-baby?" he said. Evidently he did not speak Terran.

Thondril shook his head "I'm afraid I don't speak your language." - though he realised this must be meaningless to them.

"God-shit-for-singing" the man replied with a trace of annoyance.

At this point the girl intervened. "Welter-soup-hamster-style-like" she said touching his arm gently. To the man she said "Downshift-a-beat-sweetward." indicating back up the path.

They soon arrived at a small town of sophisticated metal bungalows. People and robots wandered the streets, the people happy and healthy looking, the machines purposeful and efficient. Thondril's heart leapt. He was now more confident than ever that these people could help him return home, as soon as he figured out how to ask them.

Two weeks later he still could not communicate in anything but basic sign language. Doggedly he kept trying to crack their language, but it was frustrating unrewarding work. The townsfolk had been excited by his arrival but had soon lost interest in such a shy perennially apologising stranger. The couple he'd met on the path looked after him, giving him a bed in their home. The man seemed to think Thondril was retarded and viewed him as a type of chore. "A refusal to accept that others might not speak your language is often met even in reasonably advanced cultures" Thondril reminded himself. The girl was kinder. She brought him food with a charming smile. Often she sat with him or led him on walks to the beach, chatting pleasantly, not seeming to mind that he didn't reply. He could easily have taken care of himself - the town had a high level of automation. It seemed there was a machine to do everything, and all unguided. However he would have sorely missed the company of his hosts, limited as it was by the language barrier.

He hadn't even worked out their names. That at least ought to be simple, but they kept giving different answers and rarely responded to any of them. In frustration he had labelled them Alice and Bob, though they didn't respond to these names either.

The same problem seemed to arise with every word he tried to learn. Surely they couldn't be misunderstanding his questions? Not repeatedly. Everything seemed to have a multitude of names. He was reminded of the Borges character who invented symbols to distinguish between 'dog at 3:14 seen

from the side' and 'dog at 3:15 seen from the front', but that was a private language and moreover fictitious. Jive was spoken fluently by even quite young natives. It could not have such subtle distinctions. Surely.

"Clearly the Jive language is context sensitive in an extremely complex way." he typed into his journal, "The lexicon has many words in common with standard Terran suggesting that this was the root language of the colonists. However the grammar and semantics of Jive appear to be entirely alien. Perhaps this planet is home to another intelligent species that has influenced their language."

One afternoon an argument erupted between Alice and Bob. Although he couldn't understand a word, Thondril sensed it was about him. They shouted and gesticulated at each other for a while, then Bob stamped out slamming the door.

Alice came and sat beside Thondril then. She sat for a long time, alternating between crying and hugging him, her pretty eyes sore and red. The without warning she kissed him quickly on the lips and was gone before he could respond. From his journal entry that night: "It is not just the language that I don't understand."

But as the weeks stretched into months an understanding did form. An idea gradually emerged in his mind. An incredible idea, a colourless green idea furiously dreaming, unbelievable, impossible, yet...

They were sat in the town square.

"Baby," he spoke confidently, bluffing that he knew what he was talking about, "Super bland mojo!" Alice looked at him with interest. He had never spoken to her before without the hesitation of the foreigner in his voice.

"Stodgy pseudo man! Coming at uber-fly speed." she replied.

"Pseudo-my-arse!" he retorted with agreeable enthusiasm

"Hebe baby. You the green door" she said, eyes sparkling.

"Gibber my wotsit!" he exclaimed lightheadedly. This, he thought, this must cause her some pause.

But she just nodded, squeezed his hand and said "Hebe-chill."

With this the dam broke and understanding washed over him. He laughed then. Laughed long and loud. So much that he drew a small crowd; curious, concerned, baffled.

"Like steps in a dance," he wrote that evening, "the words have a purpose but no meaning. *Jive is just stylish gibberish.*" After that breakthrough, ideas came to him at a furious pace. "How could this happen?" he wrote, "Language serves two roles: as a tool for manipulating the physical world (by allowing cooperation between individuals and the transmission of ideas) and as a medium for social interaction. We do not normally distinguish between these, since both involve communication for the purpose of survival. But all of these people's physical needs are taken care of automatically by machines. They have no need for cooperation; no ideas to communicate. As for the social interaction aspect of language, that was always communicated as much by *how* people spoke as what they actually said. A smile, a sneer, an arched eyebrow - these are the real communicators of emotion. So the sounds and emotions of speaking have remained whilst the physical meanings of the words slowly atrophied."

His first feelings were of elation at having solved the riddle of Jive. It was the find of his career. It would be the discovery of the decade in his field. He could imagine how his fellow linguists would react: the disbelief, the amazement, the competing theories as everyone tried to claim this as proof for their approach. And for him as the discoverer: fame (within his world at least), awards, probably a chair at a prestigious university. When he got back to civilisation, he would be made. When. If... Oh.

The Jive-talkers' civilisation could not help him get back home for there was no civilisation here. Not even a society, not the way we think of society. Every Jive-talker was alone, unable to communicate any but the most basic of thoughts. And - having never had any practice - probably unable to even form complex thoughts. How could they, in a language where every word was bluff and posture, devoid of content. It was a degenerate colony. The machines still worked, but everything else had been lost. Thondril was stranded. He would never escape the planet, never return to his world. Never - and here he choked, recoiled from the horror of his situation, felt desperately trapped and physically sick - never have another intelligent conversation with a fellow being. He would go mad.

Archie Thondril - former Professor of Linguistics at Jersey University - has a nice house on Brighton beach. Well - he calls it Brighton; other people have other names, but that's ok with him. He lives with Alice now. Lying in his arms at night she will whisper into his ear; "Brillig gimble." or "Very mimsy" or other sweet nothings. He smiles at her. He tells her he loves her. She doesn't understand. That's also fine; he tells her in ways she does understand. Some things don't need words. He's not sure whether he's still sane. It no longer seems to matter.

Kabba-man chutz mega-bright. Hack-fuck-the-mother. So-no-wassup. Chill 'n chill good. Perma-style.