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Author(s)	Kobata, Takuya
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Alien Protocol¹

KOBATA Takuya

On October 30, 1938, Martians attack Earth. The report was on radio first.

Invasion from outer space: it was Orson Welles, the legendary actor, in his twenties who organized the program that has been said to have driven the whole nation into a panic. The program is based on the scientific romance *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells, the father of modern science fiction. Forty years after the publication of the novel in 1898, when the contagious fear of the Other manifested itself in the form of “Yellow Peril” in Europe, the living memory of the pseudo-Armageddon of the First World War might have been provoked by the similar plot of invasion.

From the example above, it is obvious that aliens used to be, or has been, representation of “otherness”. We also have Hollywood clichés of extra-terrestrials as monstrous figures in *Alien* series (1979-97) and *Independence Day* (1996; also known as *ID4*). Absolutely alien bodies as those of the Martians that Wells depicted in his novel are thought never to meet the system requirements for mutual understandings, nor establish any friendly relationship, with humans.

Created on Mars, whose environment is incompatible with that on Earth, Wells’ Martians are unable to move freely without some technological aid: cybernetic sense of prostheses are employed to transgress the boundary between the alien surroundings and conduct the invasion on Earth. Scenes, where

human beings, seemingly optimized for Earth, were overwhelmed by the Martians more “naturalized” with the aid of their own technology, might be interpreted as a convincing allegory. Much more emblematic, though, was the upshot of the novel; it was not the human beings that vanquished the Martians but the “natural” defensive, immune system of Earth: bacteria. After half a century, Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) followed the similar pattern in which extra-terrestrials with megalomaniac technological device are defeated by the attack from inside with the microscopic weapons, so did *ID4* (1996) in the last decade of the 20th century. In the former, there was chiasmus of the pattern: humans with the rocket technology from Earth brought into the Martian ecosystem some infection to drive Martians to extinction. In the latter, such a natural pathogen as bacteria or virus is replaced by an artificial one: a computer virus.

In order for immigrants to avoid the confrontation with the ecosystem of a colony on another planet, the term “terra-forming,” which means global alteration of the planet and its ecology into terrestrial one, was coined by an SF writer, Jack Williamson. Not so large-scale a reproduction of the suitable environment for terrestrial life form is a space suit, which is employed for humans not only to conquer the vast vacancy of the outer space, but also to bridge the gap between “our” world and an “alien” world. The automated prostheses of Martians in *The War of the Worlds* were interpreted by Robert A. Heinlein into the powered suits in *Starship Troopers* (1959), which enable humans to fight against a hostile alien life form.² As in *The Wars of the Worlds*, *Starship Troopers* deals with the complete, physiological differences, alien environments and different mentalities originated by the former two factors, between the aliens and humans. The definite gap between aliens,

or extraterrestrials and humans causes not only friction but also confliction. The aliens called “Bugs” in *Starship Troopers* seem to be direct descendants of BEMs (Bug-Eyed monsters) in pulp magazines.

Heinlein did not always describe humans’ differences with extraterrestrials as the ones inevitably leading to war, though. In many of his stories, humans are eager to establish as stable relationship with “friendly” extraterrestrials as possible in order to live together in mutual prosperity. What characterizes Heinlein’s tales of alien interaction is the protocol according to which the alien-conscious mutual communication is conducted. It is consistent with his juvenile works, which never follow the fanciful plot about alien encounters where all the life forms in this universe “naturally” understand each other and live together happily, but aim to describe the process of filling the existent gap or its failure. A crooked version of “universal” cosmopolitanism is denied there.

In this paper, my emphasis would be placed on the protocol of alien communication, or the procedures in humans negotiating with extraterrestrials differently figured from them, in order to anatomize the system that enable the protocol. Based on the result, my analysis would cover the realm of the paradoxical quality of the protocol, which, bridging the gap between different aliens, becomes neither advantageous nor disadvantageous to each of them, furthermore, links them together beyond their original design in the end.

1

Although it appears to be impossible to communicate with the “Bugs” in *Starship Troopers*, a descendant of Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*, invasion of and communication with aliens in Heinlein’s works are actually the different sides of the same

coin. *Space Cadet* (1948) describes the long journey of a troop of young solar system patrol cadets; assigned a rescue mission of a civilian from Earth in a difficult situation in the territory of the “natives” of Venus, they prevent the danger of a serious conflict with the “natives” and finally return to their unit. In *The Star Beast* (1954), the protagonists, with a complicated protocol, undermine and subvert the hegemony of mighty aliens, who are thought to be able to annihilate the whole planet Earth in a moment of time. The leading characters in *Have space Suit — Will Travel* (1958) negotiate with a powerful union of aliens to avert the worst-case scenario of annihilation of humankind on Earth. Even in *Starship Troopers*, which mostly deals with the fights against the wholly — not only physically but also mentally — alien species “Bugs,” the military force of Earth tries to capture a specimen of the “Bugs,” which is thought to serve an important function as a “brain,” to probe into the objective of the enemy, that is, to understand them.

[T]his giant raid could determine who won the war, whether next year or thirty years hence. We needed to learn more about Bug psychology. Must we wipe out every Bug in the Galaxy? Or was it possible to trounce them and impose a peace? ...

To learn their psychology we had to communicate with them, learn their motivations, find out why they fought and under what conditions they would stop; for these, the Psychological Warfare Corps needed prisoners. ... [T]o discover why Bug fight we needed to study members of their brain caste. (Starship Troopers 175-6)

The Star Beast sets the physical system requirements for intelligence, possibility of mutual understanding over the

difference between humans and extraterrestrials. Two main story lines are paralleled from the start. One sequence is a farce about the trouble caused by a "star beast" called "Lummox." A youngster named John Thomas Stuart XI after his ancestors, who inherited from his father the extraterrestrial pet his great-grandfather famous as one of the earliest space explorers took to Earth, becomes involved in the slapstick and manages to settle the matter. The other sequence describes the activity of the "Department of Spatial Affairs," which deals with matters concerning anything from "Out There." When a request is made by an alien species "Hroshii" for return of their "missing child," the department cannot fulfill the request at first. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Lummox is the missing child the Hroshii are looking for. Thus, these two sequences are intertwined and lead to a happy ending.

There was one obstacle in the process of identification of Lummox as a Hroshia (a female of the Hroshii); while Lummox and a Hroshia both have eight legs, Lummox has no hands unlike an ordinary adult Hroshia or Hroshiu (a male). In the world in this novel, manipulation is one of the three main requirements a non-human life form must fulfill to be acknowledged as a sentient being.

"... Xenologists have found that high types, equivalent to humans, always have three characteristics: speech centers, manipulation, and from these two, record keeping. So we can assume that Lummox's breed was left at the post..."

(The Star Beast 46)

After the two swelling lumps on his shoulder, which John Thomas thought was a symptom of some disease, prove to be that of sprouting of two hands, it is finally verified that Lummox is de facto and de jure an intelligent life form.

"The Cygnus Decision? We had it in elementary Customs of Civilization?

"Yes. Quote it."

... John Thomas frowned and dug into his memory. "Beings possessed of speech and manipulation must be presumed to be sentient and therefore to have innate human rights, unless conclusively proved otherwise." He sat up. "Hey! They can't kill LummoX — he's got hands!"

(The Star Beast 166-7)

Thus, LummoX, once sentenced to death, is set free, and furthermore proved to be a member of the Hroshii.

The method of discerning alien intelligence in this context evokes the concept of the Turing Test, the simplest scheme of a test of whether a machine can think, where only the information from behind the screen that stands between the interrogator and man/machine respondents is to be scrutinized.

In order that tones of voice may not help the interrogator the answers should be written, or better still, typewritten. The ideal arrangement is to have a teleprinter communicating between the two rooms. Alternatively the question and answers can be repeated by an intermediary. (Turing 434)

In this case, bodies as hardware are not considered as important as intelligence. Cutting it off from the apparent human interface, the Turing Test tries to foreground intelligence as software. It is possible to install the software-based "intelligence" in sufficiently complicated "brains" whether it is organic or not. Only through the interface of language or letters could we confirm if the installation was successful or not. More precisely, language as communicative competence itself is software, or a shared protocol by which data transfer is

made possible.

In *The Star Beast*, on the other hand, only the apparently parrot-like performance of conversation is not enough to convince the interrogators. LummoX's speech is far from sophisticated, or rather, thought to be a childish babble. It does not, however, deny LummoX intelligence, as the following dialogue shows:

"... Assuming that an e-t. is stupid because he can't speak our language well is like assuming that an Italian is illiterate because he speaks broken English. A non-sequitur."

"But look, boss, no *hands*. Maximum intelligence lower than monkeys. Maybe as high as a dog. Though not likely."

"Well, I'll concede that you are orthodox in xenological theory, but that is all. Some day that assumption is going to rise up and slap the classic xenist in the face. We'll find a civilization that doesn't need to pick at things with patty-paws, evolved beyond it." (*The Star Beast* 87-8)

Nevertheless, the least requirements for intelligence are clearly displayed in this novel. As shown in the quotation above, it is defined in the realm of diplomacy. Therefore, the importance of both intelligence high enough for language and hands as manipulators would be emphasized because they are taken for granted so that all the sentient beings would share them.

2

While the physical requirements for intelligence may become powerful to determine the course of the main plot in *The Star Beast*, the other two novels (*Space Cadet* and *Have Space Suit – Will Travel*) do not necessarily regard them as essential. Much

more significant is the exchangeability of software or protocol than the similarity of hardware. The idea is obvious in the following sequence of negotiation where a patrol cadet tries to make a deal with the Venerian natives to improve their treatment of his colleagues.

"What manner of city is thine? Have I, perhaps, journeyed so far that manner are no longer observed?"

... "My city and my daughters live ever by custom ... and I have never before heard it suggested that we fail in performance."

"I hear thee, gracious mother of many, but thy words confuse me. We come, my 'sisters' and I, seeking shelter and help for ourselves and our 'mother,' who is gravely ill. I myself am injured and am unable to protect my younger 'sister.' What have we received in thy house? Thou hast deprived us of our freedom; our 'mother' lies unattended and failing. Indeed we have not even been granted the common decency of personal rooms in which to eat."

A noise rose from the spectators which Matt correctly interpreted as the equivalent of a shocked gasp. Oscar had deliberately used the offensive word "eat," instead of talking around it...

... "Are we fish, that such should be done to us? Or are the customs such among thy daughter?"

"We follow the customs," she said shortly, and even Matt and Tex could interpret the anger in her voice. *"It was my understanding that thy breed had no decencies. It will be corrected."*

(Space Cadet 185-6)

Reverence for different customs being something common to most of Heinlein's works, the most intriguing point in this scene is that the members of the all-male patrol away team

have to pretend to be females in order to be treated as equal as the natives. That is because the Venerian natives in this novel have the female-dominated society in which males are not even allowed to appear in public. Thus, the members become “sisters,” and the commanding officer becomes “mother.” Certainly it is not a physiological alteration of gender; only their titles are temporarily switched. However, considering that Heinlein frequently uses the motif of alteration / alternation of sex / gender, we should not ignore the change of gender in terms of name in this sequence of negotiation in the climax of this novel.³ In *The Star Beast*, the pronoun “he” for Lummo was not amended to “she” until “he” proved to be the “girl” the Hroshii were looking for. In *Have Space Suit — Will Travel*, the pronoun “she” is used for the “Mother Thing,” who is not only on the side of two human protagonists, Kip and Peewee but also defends them in the negotiation where all the lives on Earth is at stake. Nevertheless, “she” is not a female in our sense of gender.

I don't know when I became aware that the Mother Thing was not, or wasn't quite, a female. But it didn't matter; being a mother is an attitude, not a biological relation.

If Noah launched his ark on Vega Five, the animals would come in by twelves. That makes things complicated. But a “mother thing” is one who takes care of others. I am not sure that all mother things were the same gender; it may have been a matter of temperament.

(*Have Space Suit — Will Travel* 189)

Names or titles determine the roles of individuals by means of protocol shared in a society. The negotiation with the Venerian natives in *Space Cadet* would have led nowhere if the cadets had not altered their gender titles. In other words,

conformity to the shared protocol is the touchstone whether someone is a sensible member of the community or not. The incident that urged the patrol to send an away team was a clash between the Venerian natives and a troop of humans who recklessly tried to land on Venus, ignoring the local customs. The captain of the group, Burke, an ex-patrol cadet, had been imprisoned when the away team arrived. Although he certainly shares the physical or physiological features of human with the patrol cadets, it is out of the question for the Venerian natives to include those who do not follow the customs in the category of sentient beings.

“... [Y]ou can hate a cat only by placing it on your own social level. She doesn’t regard Burke as ... well, as *people* at all, because he doesn’t follow the customs. We’re ‘people’ to her, because we do, even though we look like him. But Burke in her mind is just a dangerous animal, like a wolf or a shark, to be penned up or destroyed? but not hated or punished ...”

(*Space Cadet* 192, italics in the original)

It might be abominable for one to be treated not as a human being but as a “dangerous animal.” They seem to follow the completely out-of-phase laws rather than they fail to bridge the gap between two alien protocols on the same level. On the other hand, in order, at least apparently, to abolish the difference, *The Star Beast* applies a complicated pseudo-owner-pet relationship, which is based on personification of each other, to the out-of-phase relationship. LummoX, first taken out of his /her native planet to Earth by John Thomas Stuart VIII, has been inherited as the pet of the Stuarts for generations. Although John Thomas Stuart XI, the protagonist, fosters a mutual understanding similar to a friendship with LummoX, he

never allows him /her to transgress the boundary between an owner and a pet. Near the end of the story, though, Mr. Kiku, the terrestrial representative in charge of the negotiation with the Hroshii, secretly notify John Thomas' girlfriend that John Thomas' and Lummo's points of view have not actually corresponded to each other.

"Um. We are both aware that this Hroshia Lummo has long been a pet of John Thomas Stuart."

"Why, certainly. It worked out funny, didn't it?"

"Um, yes. And that Lummo was the pet of John Thomas's father before him, and so on for four generations."

"Yes, of course. Nobody could want a sweeter pet."

"... That is the point of view of John Thomas and his forebears. But there are always at least two points of view. From the viewpoint of Lummo she ... he ... was not a pet. Quite the contrary. John Thomas was *his* pet. Lummo was engaged in raising John Thomases."

(*The Star Beast* 246-7)

A reversed owner-pet relationship. It is nothing but a matter of the viewpoints, as in the quotation. Both of them are right and neither is right simultaneously. It would be another outcome of the negotiation if the mutual misunderstanding keeps their relationship in balance. In negotiating with the Venerian natives in *Space Cadet*, humans, emulating physical, gender and cultural identity absolutely alien to themselves, call for their cooperation and understanding. It is the shared protocol, or rules of diplomacy that enable this emulation.

3

In *Space Cadet*, a member of the patrol away team brought up in a Terran colony on Venus has learnt the protocol established by the Venerian natives. He is able to take full advantage of the knowledge to carry negotiations with the natives to a successful conclusion. What about the protocol in *Have Space Suit — Will Travel*? Kip and Peewee, the protagonists, are kidnapped out of Earth by typical villainous aliens but are rescued from their captivity by the colleagues of the “Mother Thing” from “Vega Five.” After they are asked to talk about their native planet under the protection of the “Mother Things,” Kip and Peewee are summoned to appear in court, where the deeds of humankind will be judged. The trial was conducted unanimously by a complex of the sentient beings from many planets that call itself “judge.” A little sooner than the judge / jury reached an adverse verdict had the “Mother Thing” and some aliens sympathetic to human beings defended them. Thus they managed to escape the worst situation. While it is clear which takes the initiative in diplomatic negotiation in these two novels, *The Star Beast* obscures the point. In *Space Cadet*, the negotiation takes place on Venus and the natives take the initiative. In *Have Space Suit — Will Travel*, it is more interrogation than negotiation in court somewhere “out there,” and the “judge” naturally takes control of the trial. Diplomatic negotiations in *The Star Beast* start on Earth. According to Dr Ftaeml, a professional interplanetary interpreter and the mediator between the Hroshii and humans, though the Hroshii has a mighty power to destroy planets hostile to them, they are indifferent to other sentient species including humankind. It seems that the Hroshii take control of the negotiation at first. Thus the initiative being seized by the

aliens, the negotiation proceeds without a shared protocol on Earth. What the Hroshii request is quite simple: the safe return of the child taken out of their native planet by an alien physically identical with a human a century ago. On the other hand, the "Department of Spatial Affairs" has neither confirmed the fact that John Thomas Stuart VIII secretly brought LummoX into Earth nor acknowledged that LummoX, without manipulation, is a sentient being equivalent to a human. That is why the conference does not go smoothly.⁴

In the long run, LummoX with manipulation shows the physical features of a member of the Hroshii, which identifies her as the "missing girl." When things begin to settle down, another problem has arisen. LummoX, wishing to continue raising "John Thomases," insists on bringing John Thomas Stuart XI, together with his girlfriend, to her native planet. The negotiations start again in order to set the conditions for the dispatch of John Thomas. Neither side makes compromise until the negotiations reach a deadlock. LummoX, now a member of the Hroshii royal family, takes control of the situation. As Dr Ftaeml says the Hroshii "are not linguists. Rich and powerful as their own speech is, it is the only language they ever learn well. They are even less talented linguistically than is your own race." (*The Star Beast* 105) Nevertheless, having spent long time on Earth, LummoX has learnt, though not perfectly, one of the languages on Earth, and is able to communicate with John Thomas and his girlfriend, Betty. LummoX, on the side of John Thomas, blames her compatriots for not accepting the conditions proposed by the "Department of Spatial Affairs." Finally, her anger awes them into carrying her orders; the Hroshii and Earth made a treaty of friendship. LummoX privately fixes the problem the diplomatic negotiations carried out publicly cannot settle; she forces her subjects to accept the

protocol locally established between John Thomas and her through one of the languages on Earth. In that sense, Earth has taken control of the protocol on which the diplomatic negotiations between the Hroshii and Earth depend. The Hroshii's superiority, once stable with the support of their mighty technology, becomes unsteady because of the protocol LummoX introduced into her compatriots, which works by stealth like the bacteria in *The War of the Worlds* or the computer virus in *ID4*. The Hroshii, who had been indifferent to other sentient beings, were easily defeated by an alien thought (or software) installed in one of their members. The moment of an upset victory arrives not only in *The Star Beast*; in *Space Cadet*, the patrol away team on Venus take advantage of the customs of the natives to improve their position; in *Have Space Suit — Will Travel*, Kip and Peewee utilize a loophole in the judge's indispensable unanimity in reaching a verdict to escape the present danger.

I wonder if the negotiations were successful for humans or not, however. Certainly, the Hroshii accepted the conditions the "Department of Spatial Affairs" proposed. The Hroshii achieved their original goal of restoring their "missing girl," but simultaneously took on unexpected responsibility to establish a friendship with humans. On the other hand, LummoX happily returns to her native planet with her wish fulfilled.

Her Imperial Highness, the Infanta of that race, 213th of her line, heiress to the matriarchy of the Seven Suns, future ruler over nine billion of her own kind, and lately nicknamed "The LummoX" contentedly took her pair of pets aboard the imperial yacht. (*The Star Beast* 253)

The interplanetary diplomatic negotiations commenced with “John Thomas” from Earth taking an alien child as a pet out of her native planet come to an end with LummoX of the Hroshii taking “John Thomas” as a pet out of Earth. And the shared protocol is left; it is neither profitable nor disadvantageous to both sides, and besides, this hybrid “software” is alien not only to the Hroshii but also to humans. Nobody could take control of it, but it surely works.

NOTES

1. This is the revised version of the paper first delivered at the 40th annual meeting of the American Literature Society of Japan at Iwate Prefectural University on October 13, 2001.
2. Nagase Tadashi, in *Neutopian Flesh*, a detailed study of artificial bodies such as automata, robots, androids and cyborgs, deals with both the prosthesis Wells’ Martians used and Heinlein’s design of the powered suit for the Mobile Infantry in *Starship Troopers* (and the manipulator “Waldo”).
3. Transgression of the set social / biological borders is a familiar motif to the readers of Heinlein. Brian Aldiss points out that “People in ... Heinlein novels often have to fit into unaccustomed roles ... — like Smith in *I Will Fear No Evil*—live in a woman’s body.” (Aldiss 270)
4. “*The Star Beast* is the only novel in the Scribner’s series that takes place entirely on Earth.” (Franklin 84) This scenario of the intrusion of a mighty alien species into Earth coincides with *The War of the Worlds*, in which all the events were limited on Earth. *Space Cadet* is also included in this series.

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