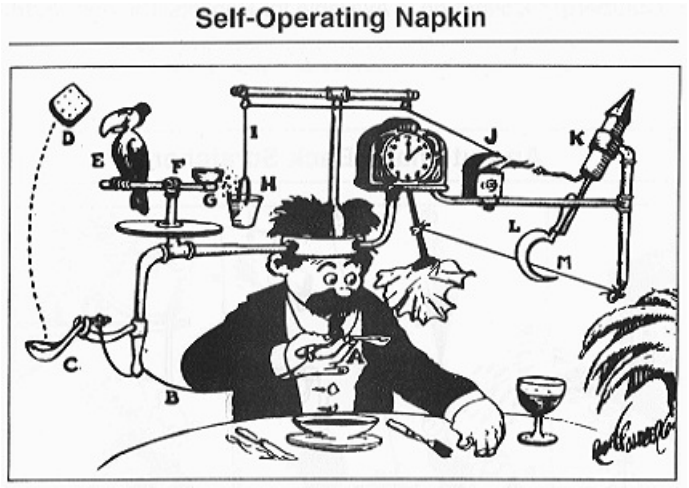
(How Esperanto Can Elucidate Rube Goldberg Machines

(Jump to Esperanto version)



I'm very interested in the expressive capabilities of Esperanto. For example, our own Esperanto has linguistic equipment to express causal relations, in particular the suffix "-igi".

Many people know the name of Rube Goldberg (1883-1970), the American cartoonist whose imaginary machines carried out simple tasks by means of complex apparatuses. They are preposterous examples of series of causations.

At lunchtime, if a few drops of soup were to roll down one's chin, traditionally the only remedy was to wipe (to clean, to dry) one's own chin with a napkin. But now, thanks to Goldberg's invention — shown in the English-language Wikipedia article on him — one can "make (the napkin) wipe" automatically.

But not only that! In said contraption, what makes the napkin wipe is a clock pendulum. And what lets the pendulum swing is a little sickle (which cuts a string, allowing the swinging movement). Thus, one can say that the little sickle "makes (something) make" the soup-eater's napkin wipe. It makes (something) make (something) clean and dry his chin.

And so on. In Goldberg's cartoon, the skyrocket makes (make...make the napkin) wipe. The cigar-lighter makes (make...make...make the napkin) wipe. The little pail makes (make...make...make...make the napkin) wipe. In sum, the spooning action of the soup-eater makes (make ... make ... make ... make ... make ... make ... make ... make ... make the napkin) wipe -- give or take a "make". Using the "tool" suffix "-ilo", what Goldberg drew can be called a "viŝ-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ilo".

All this is very awkward to express in English, but in Esperanto it's as elegant as "viŝ-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-ig-i"!

Thus our beloved Esperanto can help us to see the complex relationships among events.

Yours in good fun,
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