

Spek and Fals Invent Writing

Told by John R. Edlund

Spek wandered the world. It was a dry, quiet part of the world. Spek was sad because there was no one to talk to. Speaking words was what he did. He loved arranging words, mouthing them, vocalizing them, pronouncing them. He loved naming things, and speaking about them, telling stories. He loved shouting in a loud voice and constructing arguments. He loved the sounds of words and putting them together in rhyming, chiming patterns. He loved the rhythms of words in lines and sentences. He was an orator and a poet. But he was alone. He saw nothing but sand and sky. No one to talk to.

Speaking with Stones

After a while, Spek came to some stones on the sand. Some were round and smooth, perfect for sitting. Some were cracked and jagged. Some were larger than Spek, but some were smaller than his hand. Spek introduced himself and began talking. He commented on their different sizes and shapes. He remarked upon their beauty and dignity. As he touched each stone, he gave them names, carefully chosen and enunciated. "I will call you Gran," he said. "I will call you Bas," he said. "How do you like your names?" he asked. But the stones were not listening. Their thoughts were long and slow. Spek's words were momentary vibrations, too quick for stones to catch. Spek listened carefully, but he heard no response. He was discouraged. He tried to think of a different topic, or a word game he could play with the stones, but the stones were definitely not listening. He decided to move on.

Speaking with Cactus Plants

After more walking, Spek came to some cactus plants. They were green and covered with spines. They grew in different shapes, and some of them looked like they had large, flat hands. Spek could tell that they lived at a faster pace than stones. He introduced himself and began to give a speech on the value of words. "Words," he said, "can describe the world." "I can even describe you cactus plants. You look like you are in a frozen dance. You wave your hands in the air. Your bodies take on magical positions. Your skin is prickly and dangerous. What do you think of that, cactus plants? I can paint a picture without paint or canvas. Without words, can you describe me? I can teach you words." The cactus plants were not paying much attention. They were too busy trying to find some water with their roots and taking energy from the sun. After a long while, they thought together about what to do about the strange being who spoke to them. They decided to do nothing.

Spek waited a long while for a response, but the cactus plants did nothing. Then he noticed that the cactus plants had purple fruits. He felt hungry and asked if he could eat one. The cactus did not say yes, but it did not say no either. Spek grasped one of the fruits, taking care to avoid the spines. He broke it loose from the spiny green hand of one of the plants. The cactus plants were horrified! A dirty fruit stealer, a plant breaker! Spek ate the fruit. It was delicious. He thanked the cactus plant. "Well, at least he is polite," thought the cactus. But it did not speak.

Speaking with the Silent One

Spek went on, looking for someone to talk to. He was feeling very lonely now. He came to a low hill. At the top of the hill, someone was sitting cross-legged on the ground. It was Stil, the silent one. Stil was thinking about how big and empty the world was. He had ears and a mouth, but he had never, ever spoken a word, or even thought one. Spek introduced himself and said, "I have been looking

everywhere for someone to talk to. Will you talk with me?” Stil looked up, but said nothing. It took a while for him to leave his thoughts behind and recognize that someone was speaking to him. Actually, he had never met another person before. Spek was so happy, just because Stil looked at him. It was a response! He finally had someone to talk to. So he began to talk and talk and talk. He talked about words, about his travels, about the sky, the sun, the stones and the cactus plants. He described things. He told stories. He argued that words were important. Stil listened. At first, he didn’t understand. His thoughts had always been about spaces, about the sky and the sun, and his own body. He didn’t know words. But after a while, he began to understand a little. After a longer while, he understood even more. But it was hard for the words to have meaning. They slipped away. They didn’t attach to things. Stil became tired and confused. Finally, he put his hands over his ears. Spek didn’t notice at first because he was so caught up in his words, but when he noticed, he stopped talking.

Spek felt ashamed. He had talked too much. He hadn’t listened. Even though Stil did not speak, he should have given him space. He sat down next to Stil and was silent. A long time passed.

After a while, Spek noticed that Stil’s hand were no longer covering his ears. Spek asked quietly, “Would you like to see the stones?” Stil got up, ready to follow.

They walked together in silence for a long time. Spek had used up his words for now and he knew that Stil was tired of them. After a while, they came to the stones. Spek introduced Gran and Bas and all the other stones. Stil sat on Bas and began to think about stones. They were new thoughts for him. He had never seen stones before. The long walk and thinking about stones calmed his mind. He was in peace again.

Speaking with Fals

Spek was thinking too. He was thinking about how quickly the wind blew his words away. If he wanted to talk to stones, he needed more lasting words. He was still thinking about this when he saw a figure approaching. He got up and walked toward the figure. He didn’t want a stranger to disturb Stil’s stone thinking. As the figure approached, Spek said, “Hello, I am Spek.” The figure changed shape until it looked just like Spek, and said, “Hello, I am Spek.” Spek said, “You are confused, I am Spek. You are someone else.” The figure repeated what Spek said. Spek should have been excited because he was having a conversation, except that it did not feel like a conversation. The figure just repeated everything that Spek said. Spek stopped talking and sat on the ground. The figure did the same.

Spek thought for a long time. How could he break this pattern? Finally, he said, “I am not Spek. I am called Fals because I tell lies.” The figure repeated Spek’s words, shivered, and changed shape. Spek had forced it to speak the truth and broken the pattern. Now Fals began to talk. It said, “I am the master of copies, simulacra, illusions, tricks, and representations. I seem to be the truth, but I am a lie, or a defective copy of the truth. I am unreliable, but I am useful. You need my help.” Spek considered this. He asked, “How can you help me? I need nothing but conversation, and your conversation is repetitive and frustrating.” It answered, “You want your words to last. I can make long lasting copies.”

Spek did not trust Fals, but what it said was true. He wanted to speak to slower creatures. He wanted his words to last a long time. He wanted to speak to creatures who might not even exist at this moment. These were big wishes. “How can you do this?” Spek asked.

Fals Teaches the Alphabet

Fals began drawing shapes in the sand with its finger. “This shape represents a sound,” it said. “This one represents another.” “This one is Ah. This one is Kuh.” Fals made shapes for many sounds. Spek learned them and began spelling words. He was amazed. The words remained after they were written. He could read them over and over. But Spek’s happiness was brief. A little whirlwind came across the sand and blew away the words. Spek said to Fals, “Your words last only a little longer. It is no good.”

Fals said, “You just need more durable material. You can carve words on wood or rock. You can mix soot and water or oil and write on plant material. You can draw letters on wet clay. There are many ways.” Spek asked, “Will it last long enough for stones to read?” Fals said, “Stones read very slowly. It is best to carve your words on the stone.” Spek thought that might hurt the stone and make it angry, but he kept his words to himself.

Spek Writes a Message

Spek and Fals walked toward Stil and the stones. When Stil saw Fals, he covered his eyes. Spek saw that Stil was disturbed again. He told Fals, “We will meet again, but my friend needs peace. You should go now.” He watched as Fals walked away. Spek told Stil that Fals was gone. Stil uncovered his eyes and went back to thinking about the nature of stones. Spek knelt in front of Gran and wrote in the sand, “Hello Gran. I am Spek. Do you like your name?” He sat on the ground and waited for a response.