PLIN0068 Constructed Languages

2024–25

Lecture 1: Introduction to constructed languages

Languages

What should count as a language?

- human languages, animal languages
- logical/mathematical languages, computer languages
- traffic light, mouse clicks

- For the purposes of this module, any system that allows for transmission of information counts as a language
- Your original conlang should be an 'infinite language', a language with infinitely many well-formed expressions

Types of constructed languages (conlangs)

People have been conlanging for different purposes, e.g.

- Religious
- Philosophical ('A logical language for logical thinking'; 17th century-)
- To give commands to computers (computer languages)
- To enable universal communication, (auxiliary languages, e.g., Esperanto)
- To hide information (cryptolects/cants/argots)
- For people with language-related disabilities
- Language revitalisation
- Artistic, entertainment (e.g., Klingon from *Star Trek*)
- **To teach linguistics**

A posteriori and *a priori* conlangs

- The easiest way of conlanging is by taking an existing language, and making some changes to it
- A conlang created this way is called an ***a posteriori*** language
- The simplest of *a posteriori* languages is a relexification language or a **relex**. A relex is made by simply replacing words/morphemes of an existing language
    - *Lingua Ignota* (see below)
    - Argots, e.g. Cockney rhyming slang, thieves' cant, Pig Latin
    - Non-verbal codes like Morse code

A posteriori vs. *a priori* conlangs (cont.)

- The language you construct must be an ***a priori*** language, a conlang that is not *a posteriori*
- But the *a posteriori* vs. *a priori* distinction is not always entirely clearcut!

On the next three slides, you'll see:

- a clearly *a posteriori* language: **Medial** (Weisbart 1922)
- a clearly *a priori* language: **Luftlandana** (Larsson 1893)
- an intermediate language: **Bolak** (Bollack 1899)

These examples are taken from Appendix B of Arika Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages*, 2009

A posteriori: Medial

> Un Englo, un Franco ed tin Deuto havit le taske pintir kamele. Le Englo voyajit ad Afrike for studiir le kamele in tisui domie, le Franco gidit al zoologi jarden, ed le Deuto pintit on kamelo ex le profunde de sui psykel.

An Englishman, a Frenchman, and a German were supposed to paint a camel. The Englishman traveled to Africa to study the camel in its habitat. The Frenchman went to the zoo, and the German painted a camel out of the depth of his psyche.

A priori: Luftlandana

> Ri napa luft byser hinsko. Napa ri spru feiste naj bar johrajb.

We have invented a new language. We have seven moments of rest daily.

Intermediate: Bolak

> Ak vop sfermed pro spes maned, if om pobl to pobl, ne ei mnoka pfo an am lank.

What an immense advantage for mankind, if from people to people we could communicate through the same language.

Further examples of existing conlangs

Ignota Lingua ('Unknown Language')

- One of the oldest conlangs
- Created by St. Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), a German abbess, writer, and philosopher
- True purposes unclear
- A partial relex of Latin, so *a posteriori*

- >1000 neologisms (e.g., *loifol* for *populus*)
- Accompanied by Littaræ Ignotæ ('Unknown Letters')

More on Wikipedia

Solresol

- An example of a 'philosophical language'
- Created by Jean-François Sudre in 1827, and popularised by Vincent and Boleslas Gajewky

- Has 7 syllabels based on the Western musical scale: *do re mi fa sol la si*
- A word can consist of 1-4 syllables, so the language has 2,660 words in total
- Has various grammatical rules

- An examples of a clearly *a priori* language

More info on omniglot.com and Wikipedia

Volapük ([vola'pyk])

- Intended to be an auxiliary language (**auxlang**) as a practical lingua franca
- Had a million speakers in the 19th century
- Designed by Johann Meyer Schleyer, a German priest in 1879-
- Some grammatical properties:
  - Most roots are of English origin, but still *a priori*
  - A root is always CVC
  - Fully regular morphology
- Later modifications split the Volapük community

Volapük: Examples

'world'	**Singular**	**Plural**
Nominative	vol	vols
Accusative	voli	volis
Genitive	vola	volas
Dative	vole	voles

- Vola-pük = world's-language, with *vol* < *world*, and *pük* < *speak*

See Wikipedia for more information

Esperanto

- One of the most successful auxlangs with many active users with (near) natives
- Created by Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof 1887
- Properties of Esperanto
  - Five vowels, 23 consonants
  - Roots are mainly drawn from European languages
  - Two cases (nominative, accusative)
  - Relatively free word order
- It was designed to be free from irregularities, but recent developments have introduced some (e.g., accusative marking is being lost, but retained in some common phrases like *saluton* 'hello')

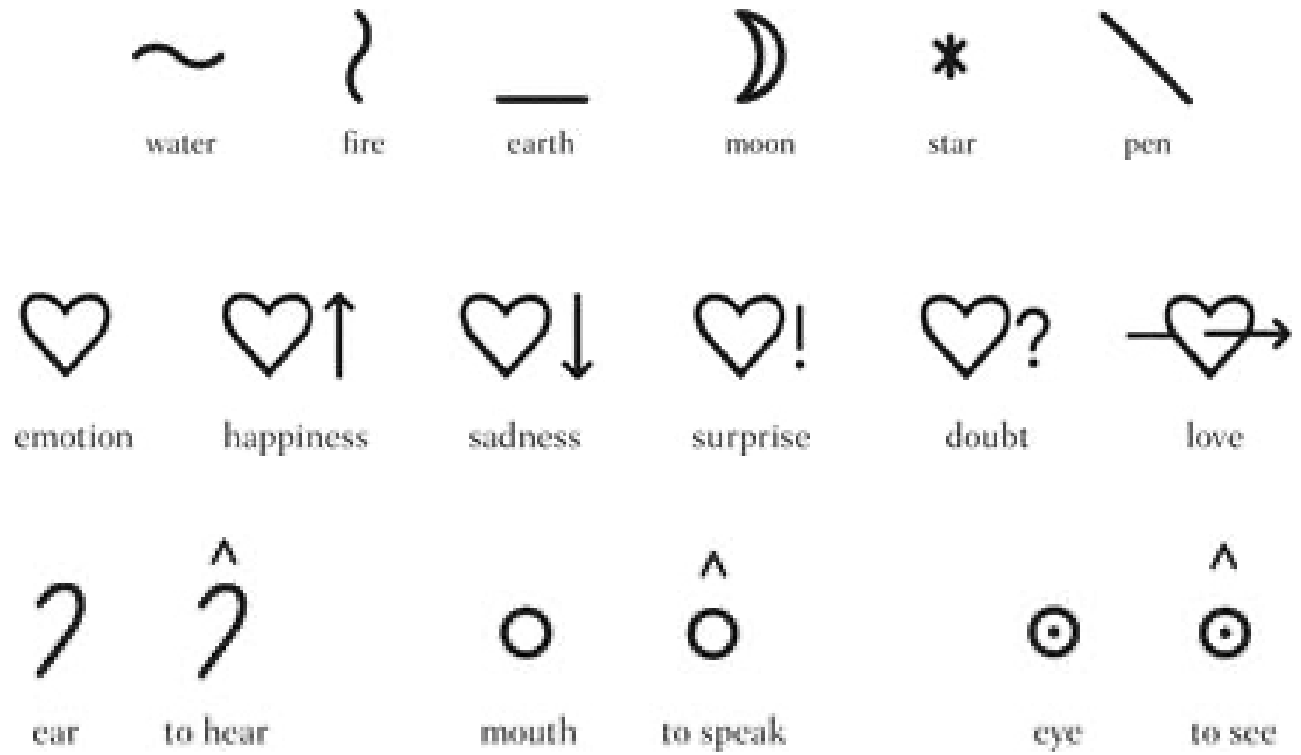
Blissymbolics

- Created by Charles K. Bliss in 1949
- Bliss intended it to be an *a priori* pictorial auxlang
    - Inspiration from Chinese characters (although Bliss's understanding of Chinese characters was shallow, as Okrent 2009 points out)
    - Purely written language, no sounds
    - Each symbol represents perfectly transparent meaning, no need for learning, no room for manipulation

Blissymbolics Communication International

Blissymbolics: Examples

Examples from Okrent (2009: Ch. 14)



Blissymbolics: Examples

As Okrent (2009: Ch. 14) points out, some cases are not so transparent

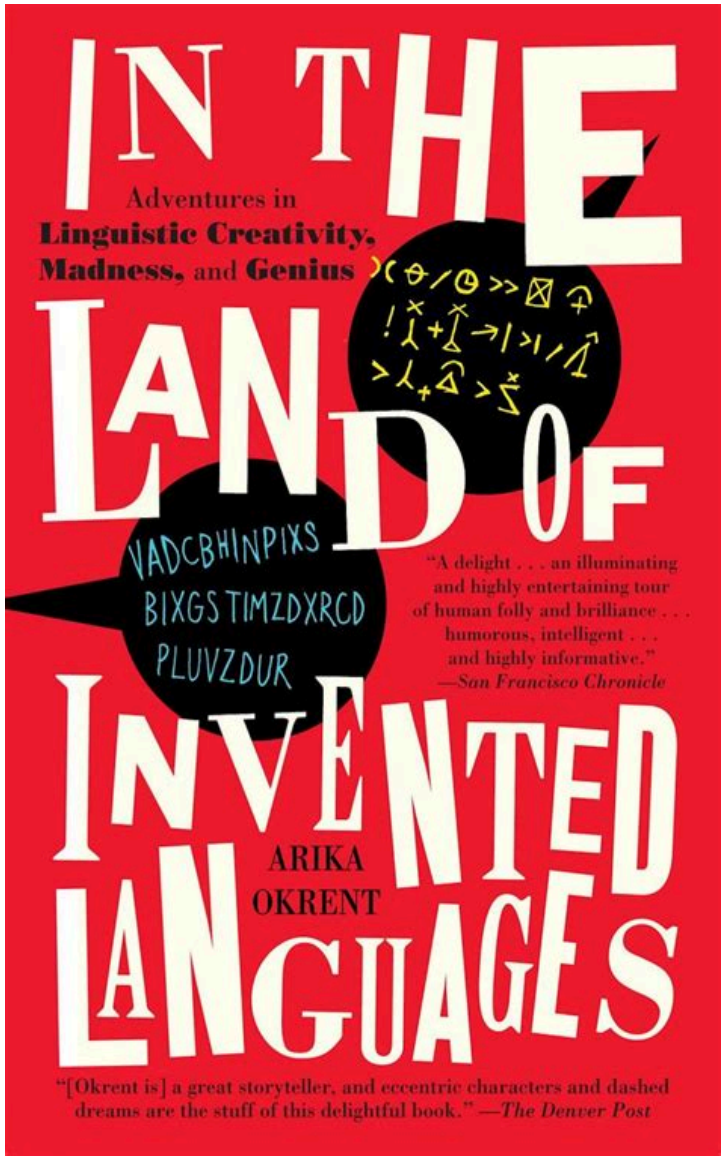
- Blissymbolics never had explicit **compositional rules** about how to combine symbols
- Users of Blissymbolics brought (culturally driven) new uses of symbols into the system (which upset Bliss; cf. the Radiolab episode)

Conlangs in sci-fi and fantasy

- Lunar from Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone*
- Sindarin, Quenya, Adûnaic, etc. from John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's Middle-earth novels
- Paku from *Land of the Lost*, created by Victoria Fromkin
- Thhtmaa from *Dark Skies*, created by Matt Pearson
- Irathient and Castithan from *Defiance*
- Na'vi from *Avatar*
- Dothraki and Valyrian from *Game of Thrones*, created by David J. Peterson
- Klingon from *Star Trek*, created by Mark Okrand
- The alien language in *Arrival*
- Warig and Mere from *Beowulf: Return to the Shildlands*, created by David Adger

More on conlangs

Arika Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages*, 2009



Your conlang project

Our goals

- This course is not about conlangs, but about natural language
- Through conlanging, we'll learn about natural language

- Your conlang shouldn't be just an *a posteriori* language, including a relex, but an *a priori* language
- It should be different from (possible) natural languages in all (or most) aspects: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics/pragmatics

- No need to construct a complete language. Give a 'fragment', and comment on its properties and how it's different from, or similar to, (possible) natural languages

Final essay

- You need to explain:
    i. Who the intended 'users' are. They don't need to be humans.
    ii. Phonological inventory (primitive signals), how to put them together
    iii. Morphological rules, and some example words and morphemes
    iv. Syntactic rules, and some example constructions
    v. Semantic rules
- Write a short passage in your language with glosses
- Extra points for going beyond these core grammatical aspects, e.g., pragmatics, diachronic changes, sociolinguistics, writing system

Example Project 1: Impossible human language

- Construct a language for humans that has rare or impossible features
  - Phonology: only consonants, no vowels; unusual syllable structure
  - Morphology: infixes only
  - Syntax: finite state grammar
  - Semantics: only first-order quantifiers
- Extra: How it might evolve, if actually put in use, given theories of language change

Example project 2: A sign lang for a fictional species

- Construct a sign language for a fictional species
- Describe what kind of creature it is (e.g., creature with three arms and 3 fingers, excellent visual perception but no auditory perception)
- Discuss the 'phonology' of the language, given the anatomycal features of the creature, and how it differs from, or similar to, human language
- Similaly, discuss how morphology and/or syntax could be different from, or similar to, human language
- Extra: Pragmatics, given fictional assumptions about how they communicate; or develop a writing system