

Fiat Lingua

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LoneStarCon 3 Constructed Languages Presentation

sponsored by the Language Creation Society

from the LCS flyer:

Created languages these days have many uses, one being use in science fiction. After some introductory material, such as speech sounds and other channels, this will be a presentation on possibly alien (or at least non-human) language components. In particular, some different ways in which words in a sentence might relate to each other will be discussed along with the relevant word-modifications.

I. Introduction

A. Who I Am and Some Terminology

- My name is Jeffrey S. Jones. I'm not a professional linguist.
- "ConLang" is short for Constructed Language, named after CONLANG mailing list, which started in Boston, 1991.
- This contrasts with "NatLang", which is short for Natural Language.

B. Different Kinds of Conlangs

There are different purposes for conlangs; some people use a triangular classification:

- International Auxiliary Languages (IAL or auxlang),

- engineered languages (engelang), and
- languages for various artistic purposes (artlang).

However, these classes can overlap.

See the back of the LCS flyer for a list of conlang sites.

The IAL's include Volapük, Esperanto, Glosa, Interlingua, and many others.

An engelang has a set of requirements and should be testable. The most famous engineered language may be James Cooke Brown's Loglan. Some are designed as Machine Translation Interlinguas. Possibly, Wilkins' philosophical language and others such fit here too.

Artistic purposes include use in fiction, games, personal use, and use as a work of art in itself. A major subclass of artlangs is the naturalistic school; the description of one of these might pass for that of a natlang.

Some well-known fictional conlangs are Quenya, Klingon, Láadan, Na'vi, and more recently Dothraki.

BTW, languages are not necessarily spoken; they can be visual and include sign languages such as the alien Rikchik language, which is done with tentacles. There's at least one conlang Dritok requiring both sound and gesture. Both spoken and non-spoken conlangs can be naturalistic or alien.

C. Community of Language Creators

There are a number of online conlanging communities, both general purpose and for particular languages or groups of languages. Probably, most language construction enthusiasts are hobbyists. See the back of the flyer again for some links.

II. Linguistics Overview

There are lots of different ways to create a language. One thing that's helpful is some knowledge of linguistics and various natural languages.

A. Phonetics and Phonology

Phonetics is the study of how speech sounds are produced and sensed. Phonology is concerned with how the speech sounds of a given language are perceived, what their distribution is, how they go together, etc. Phonology also refers to some theoretical stuff which we're not concerned with.

B. Morphology

Morphology deals with how words are put together (whether using discrete morphemes or not). There are two parts: inflectional and derivational. If I talk about derivational morphology, it will be along with the lexicon, if I talk about that.

C. Syntax

Syntax is one of the biggest areas of research in linguistics, but I'm only going to mention the parts most useful to conlanging, such as argument structure and word order typology. Morphology and syntax may be combined as morphosyntax.

D. Lexicon and Derivation

An IAL has different requirements from an artlang for which words are basic and which are derived.

E. Writing Systems

A language can have both a native script and a romanization, or several. Types of writing systems include alphabets, abugidas, abjads, syllabaries, and logographic systems. There are also mixed systems, such as Japanese.

III. Some Human Morphosyntax

The noun phrases or pronouns that go with a verb are its **arguments**. Each argument in a particular context is assigned a semantic role such as **agent** or doer and **patient** or done-to. The possible roles depend on the verb. "Give" has a donor, recipient, and what's given as roles. "Walk" has only a subject. This is called the **argument structure** of the verb (different verbs can have different argument structures). Often, the agent is the subject and the patient the object, but not always.

There are a number of ways the roles and arguments are matched up:

- A. Use word order, as in English.
- B. Use case suffixes on the nouns (and possibly their modifiers), as in Russian.
- C. Use a hierarchy: some kinds of nouns are more likely to be agents and others are more likely to be patients; in sentences where this is not the case, an indication is made by the form of the verb, such as inverse voice or alignment. Another way is to mark the patient as obviative.
- D. Use prefixes (or suffixes) on the verb indicating the classes of the subject and the object, like Swahili.

The languages which can be analyzed as having subjects and objects and use scheme A are classified according to the order of the subject **S**, the object **O**, and the verb **V**. There are 6 possible combinations:

- **SOV** - This is the most common type. Japanese, Creek, Farsi.
- **SVO** - This type is almost as common. English.
- **VOS** and **VSO** - are less common. Hawaiian, Irish.
- **OSV** and **OVS** - rare; mostly South American. (Klingon is **OVS**)

Many languages are mixed: they use one type in some cases and another in others. There are also languages where the order is determined by pragmatic concerns rather than syntactical ones.

A couple other parameters of classification are whether nouns go before or after the words modifying them and whether prepositions or postpositions are used.

IV. Non-human Morphosyntax

There are some things I've used in my conlangs which I haven't yet found to occur in human languages, although I could easily be wrong! Some of these are rather artificial but they might be used by aliens etc.

A. K/L Pronouns

The 1st person (singular) always refers to the speaker and the 2nd person always refers to the addressee. K/L pronouns (a term I invented and nobody else uses) are different. The K-person, which stands for "knower", refers to the speaker in statements, but to the addressee in questions of any type while the L-person, which stands for "learner" is the opposite: it refers to the addressee in statements and to the speaker in questions.

What I like about this is that yes/no questions are identical to the corresponding statement except for the word that indicates it's a question:

K saw L's mother. *"I saw your mother."*

K saw L's mother? *"Did you see my mother."*

In natlangs, a null pronoun may act like a K-person pronoun, but K is never expressed.

I also have an M pronoun which includes both speaker and addressee; this is really the 1st person inclusive dual or plural that occurs in many human languages.

I'm now told that Tibetan does something like this!

B. Recursive Phrases

The phrase syntax I used in one of my conlangs is

Article - Modifiers - Noun

where a modifier, among other things, can be a prepositional phrase or a participle with an object (in English, such modifiers follow the noun):

{the big in [the yellow belong_to (the old man) house] dog}
"the big dog in the yellow house belonging to the old man"

Actually some natlangs use a limited amount of recursion but not to the extent I allowed in my conlang.

C. Noun-Verb Pairing

Each noun or pronoun is paired with a following verb and vice versa. In other words, a sentence consists of a number of word pairs, each pair consisting of a noun part plus a verb part. Note that the verbs in this conlang include words that correspond to adjectives, prepositions, and some adverbs in English, as well as more typical verbs. In my conlang, the relationship between the noun part and the verb part can be one where the noun part is an argument of the verb part or one where the verb part is a modifier of the noun part.

I'm not the first conlanger to use a scheme like this (which in itself is not too far from what some natlangs do). There are two or three other conlangs that I know of, one

of which (iljena) interleaves the noun and verb parts! Another noun-pairing conlang is Trukva.

Here are some simplified examples (I've omitted the suffixes which specify the syntactical functions etc.):

cat-orange. "The cat is orange."

cat-orange house-in. "The orange cat is in the house."

horse-run man-see. "The man sees the horse run."

D. Word Indexing

This one is hard to do non-visually, but I'll try.

Words are connected through indexes and index types rather than word order. One version used indexes on each word, allowing completely free word order. The other used indexes only on nouns and verbs, allowing the order of phrases in a clause to vary while keeping to a strict order of words within phrases. I'll talk about the 1st scheme.

The index type is used in the first scheme and determines the word's usage. There are basically two index types. Words used as syntactical nouns and noun modifiers are **restrictive** and words used as syntactical verbs and verb modifiers are **assertive**. I'm using subscripts for the former and superscripts for the latter in my notes. In the following, the two words are connected by the index **k**, not because they're adjacent:

cat_k orange^k "The cat is orange."

cat_k orange_k "the orange cat"

However, a word may be transitive or otherwise bivalent and therefore have two indexes. Such a word used as a noun modifier has one restrictive index in order to modify the noun and one assertive index linking to additional information (one set of index and type information is a prefix).

cat_k ^kcaught^m mouse_m "The cat caught a mouse."
cat_k _kcaught^m mouse_m "the cat that caught a mouse"

Remember that the word order is free; the following could occur:

mouse_m orange^k _kcaught^m cat_k "The cat that caught the mouse is orange."

E. Marking Valence

The valence (or valency) of a verb is the number of arguments the verb can have. In one of my conlangs, I used a suffix on the verb when the number of arguments actually appearing in the clause differs from the number expected to appear; the suffix specifies the former. To complicate things, the number of expected arguments depends on how the word is used. If the word is assertive, such as the main verb of a sentence, the expected valence equals the maximum valence of that verb. But if the word is used as a noun, the expected value is one less than the maximum.

V. Conclusion

There may of course be other bits of non-human grammar. It was suggested that using the number of

syllables in a word or morpheme for grammatical purposes might be used; I've never used this myself but shall start thinking about it.