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COMPOSING LYRICS IN THE WORLD'S LEAST LYRICAL LANGUAGE by John Quijada

In April 2015, a thread appeared on the Conlang Mailing List entitled “Worst Poetry Language.” As might be expected, someone mentioned my conlang Ithkuil as probably being the prize-winner in terms of the thread’s title. To quote one post from the thread,

“If every feature of a language is meaningful, it would be very, very hard to express a given meaning poetically. I suspect Ithkuil poetry is virtually impossible. You can't even really do repetition-style poetry well with it, given how much must be expressed in a statement. There must be an ideal level of ambiguity — too much makes it difficult to express something, too little leaves no room for complex, layered meanings.”

Another post implied that languages such as Lojban (and by extension Ithkuil) would make nuance or wordplay pretty much impossible.

To which longtime Conlang List denizen And Rosta replied:

Ithkuil would make for wonderful poetry. I'd choose words for their phonological palette (i.e. for their 'sound') and the rich meanings would simply emerge (how they may). It would be like early/classical (not late) surrealism whose processes of composition evade the intervention of the conscious mind.

A Conlang List thread devoted to Ithkuil back in January 2013 had also questioned the idea whether the language could be used to write poetry.

So . . . can such a language indeed be used to write poetry?

In late 2013, after more than a twenty-year hiatus, I dusted off an old MIDI keyboard and began indulging in one of my many non-conlanging hobbies, music composition — specifically progressive rock music. Over the next five months I composed the music for four long songs and made new arrangements of two old songs composed back in the early nineties (one of them composed by my twin brother Paul).

Now it was time to write lyrics. I had long promised/threatened to explore using my constructed language Ithkuil for poetry but had never found the motivation to do so. I realized that these song lyrics could provide an excellent opportunity for me to make good on that promise, allowing me to discover the poetical possibilities of a language whose reputation had caused it to be nominated as the world’s worst language for poetry.

It should be noted that I do not consider that song lyrics constitute poetry per se, as the lines do not always follow a strict meter — many syllables are stretched across two or more beats or multiple notes, or paused for rests in the music, etc. (And being progressive-rock, the fact that the music is often in time signatures such as 5/4, 6/8, 7/4, and 11/8 doesn't help either!) If these were meant to be real poems, I'd demand a strict meter and overt rules for consonantal and vocalic alliteration. Nevertheless, as I describe below, I was able to write lyrics that display a far greater amount of rhyme and internal alliteration than I would have thought possible.

At any rate, the challenge manifested itself in three ways:

First of all, what to write about? Being progressive rock, lyrics such as “*Baby, baby, let's get it on...*” just weren't going to cut it. So I took a few weeks to sit with a notepad and contemplate myself, my values, my memories, fears and regrets, humorous fantasies, surreal scenes, etc. and scribbled these thoughts and impressions as random notes (in English), then turned them into more or less coherent themes and verbal images. In one case, a particular scene from a novel I'd co-written years earlier with my brother Paul inspired me to turn the scene into song lyrics.

This process left me with three songs' worth of English prose imagery. While the English lines were non-poetical and non-metrical, the challenge was to turn them into lines of Ithkuil that would accomplish the following:

- (a) fit the rhythms, melodies, and beats of the music,
- (b) demonstrate some sort of quasi-poetical internal alliteration,

- (c) demonstrate some sort of rhyme-scheme or at least vocalic alliteration at the ends of lines, again to convey a poetical sound, and
- (d) be more or less phonologically accessible and euphonic to listeners so that the eventual singing of these lyrics didn't sound like someone imitating the sounds of a garbage disposal (as someone once described the sound of Ithkuil).

Secondly, posing a greater challenge, one of the two songs I'd written in the early nineties already had Italian-language lyrics that I wanted to preserve [why Italian? it's a long story!] — so it meant translating Italian lyrics into Ithkuil, hopefully preserving the vocal melodies, rhythms and cadences of the original song.

Similarly, after playing one of the new compositions for my brother, he liked it so much he sat down and spontaneously wrote English-language lyrics to it. I liked his lyrics so much that I decided to translate them directly into Ithkuil — again posing the problem of matching Ithkuil lyrics to the rhythms and cadences of the original English lyrics.

Thus, I had the task of writing lyrics to three songs from prose notes in English, plus two finished sets of lyrics from other languages that I had to translate into Ithkuil and make fit the music. That left me with one song still needing lyrics, and it was this sixth and last song that made for the most interesting challenge of all — composing lyrics directly in Ithkuil, i.e., not translating from another source language, whether finished lyrics or simply written notes. The nature of the Ithkuil language allows a speaker to use its morphology to transparently craft words and sentences to succinctly express thoughts, ideas, concepts, and describe complex situations that do not exist in natural languages and would require whole paragraphs to be able to paraphrase. Could I craft the lyrics to an entire song in such a fashion? Wouldn't that mean having to "think" in Ithkuil?

Anyway, I decided to first tackle the two songs requiring direct translation from Italian and English respectively. Except for the LCC5 relay and one other translation request, it had been over two years since I'd worked with Ithkuil and I was rusty. So I figured the way to dust off my conlanging chops was with a straightforward translation exercise followed by figuring out a way to either cram the syllables into the music (or stretch them across the music as the case might be) and make them sound as euphonic as possible. There was also the need to add material as necessary given Ithkuil's famed conciseness.

And that's what I did. Here's the opening stanza of the first song as an example of the process:

From the Italian original:

*Comincio a pensare che la vita è / un circo di pagliacci, è così
qualcosa che tu dica cos'altro fai / credi che zimbello sono, sì*

[TRANSLATION: "I'm beginning to think that life is / a circus of clowns, it's like that
No matter what you say, you do something else / you think I'm a fool, yes"]

Into Ithkuil:

**Afkamta ti átaca ümt eavaštús / ekšiarmé im ovarpiñžaňúd
Ulalirñ ielarkardh ku ixtoilípa / fkasa ki uikšálasqa ta ur**

Afkamta ti átaca ümt eavaštús

LITERALLY: "I begin to believe that being alive manifests itself as attendance at the venue for a formal entertainment show"

ekšiarmé im ovarpiñžaňúd

LITERALLY: "of packs of clowns (metaphorically-speaking) and chaotic sets of games to the exclusion of all else"

Ualírñ ielarkardh ku íxtoilípa

LITERALLY: *“What you mean by your verbal utterance is insignificant due to the fact that you act in another/different manner”*

Afkasa ki uikšálasqa ta ur

LITERALLY: *“You believe that I’m merely a fool indeed”*

Trying to adapt Italian or English lyrics to Ithkuil is both frustrating and interesting due to the wild differences in lexico-morphology, morpho-syntax, and morpho-phonology compared to Ithkuil. As an example, here is one of the stanzas to be translated from the English lyrics my brother wrote:

*The time has come; the present pushes you
into the future now; there's nothing more to do
Fate that you left to chance hangs all in tatters
now face the change and all that matters*

So after much trial and error, starting first with a literal “word-for-word” translation, then modifying backward into a form of Ithkuil that takes advantage of the synergistic short-cuts and nuance the language makes possible, the translation ends up as follows:

**Ukaláz êtçolé irz ke tçî’ólökké
Upšařoarzoenzeap^hok^heřükke
Ôkalazé fral éfi’al ain-n ke
Uq^h saxhta orñ acalañuq^he**

The literal translation of the above is:

“Now in this moment the present metaphorically moves you toward the future and you can do nothing about it

The random set of future events against which one is resigned to fate are in a state of near-total disintegration metaphorically-speaking

The moment has now metaphorically arrived when you must be made to face

all of the interconnected sets of changes and things that are important metaphorically-speaking”

What I found interesting as I began to craft these lyrics was that the language’s father flexible morpho-phonology was making it much easier to achieve rhymes and internal alliteration than I would have guessed. Specifically, while “standard” prose translations into Ithkuil utilize synthetic portmanteau-like morphemes, the same meaning can often be accomplished using more isolating morphology as well. Normally, I wouldn’t do so, due to the desire to “keep it concise” as Ithkuil is generally noted for. But with song lyrics, fitting the lyrics to the rhythm, melodies, and cadences of the music is what counts, not morpho-phonological conciseness. This led me to discover ways of utilizing the language’s morphology, syntax, and morpho-phonology in ways I’d never considered before.

So in examining the above stanza, note how the first three lines of the original English content are rendered in the first two lines of the Ithkuil version. This left me with the problem of having to find a way to spread the last line of the English stanza across two whole lines of the Ithkuil version. To do so, I essentially cheated in two ways: first, by spelling out in a word-for-word manner the phrase “Now the moment has come...” even though the suffix **-az** already translates the simple word “now” from the English version; secondly, using the flexibilities of Ithkuil morpho-phonology (particularly epenthetic vowels and separating suffixes out from their stems as autonomous adjuncts) to create more syllables.

Also interesting to note is the Ithkuil word “**upšaŋoarzoenzeap^hok^hetükke**” which comprises the whole of the second line. This is an example of what I consider a “poetic” word in Ithkuil, i.e., a word which would only be uttered within poetry, given that, at twelve syllables, it pretty much violates the phonotactic preferences of the regular spoken language. In standard spoken Ithkuil, the equivalent semantic content would most likely be the three-word phrase “**uč^hasêŋok^he oenz upšaŋükkoarz**”, the first word of which means “is in a state of near-total destruction” based on a stem *-uč^h* “to integrate” which doesn’t appear in the “poetic” version (being replaced there by a simple suffix *-eap^h* indicating a disintegrating state).

Here’s an example of the degree of license I’m taking with Ithkuil’s morpho-phonological flexibility in order to fit the words to the music:

Eibawusañ teiwa dyoeyalómmeamm afkeudyasóá ûñ zatqasou?

Translation:

Do I dare hope to ever recover a sense of certainty or sanity?

If this sentence were simply being spoken in conversation, it would take a more “standardized” form as follows:

Eibawusañ tei fkeudyásóa êl-ldyê tei zatqasûñou?

Following the translation of those first two songs, I switched gears to begin writing original Ithkuil lyrics for the three songs for which I only had prose notes in English as to what I wanted each stanza to be about. Here I was free to compose the lines as I pleased, as long as I captured the essence of what I’d written in my notes. Which meant I had to get more creative in actually crafting the lyrics themselves.

For example, one of the songs was to be about a first-person narrator pondering what he would say to his younger past self if he could. The English notes for the first stanza only state the premise “what would I say to my past younger self if I could?” plus the question as to whether to tell this younger self of future lost loves. The resulting lyrics reflect an approach that, for the first two lines, constitute a near word-for-word translation of the premise itself, while the last two lines of the stanza have been composed “from scratch” based solely on the theme of lost loves.

**Ardh wielahutta tu tva’ettephökku
éikui’la êñ-ñc’a teiwa tçou’ulu?
Údüwa waibzahul a’tímqoert u nu
aps amqoertervall a’tímqoerturvu?**

*What would I say to my past younger self
were I able to travel just once back in time?
Would I recount for him the loves I shared,
the loves passed by, the loves I lost?*

Again, the flexibility of the morphology, morpho-phonology, and morpho-syntax allowed me to achieve a far greater degree of internal alliteration and outright rhyming than I would have thought possible. Below is another example stanza from the same song with its English translation. For this stanza the original prose notes state that the narrator considers that, by telling his younger self of what is to come, he will potentially cause that younger self to become a different person than the narrator ever was:

**Oññ ândairpöt’ ip ütvaqayülo
iülái’st’axta twiam-mt’uo
eñk’alalañ ûkt ac’át ŋiuteowa
a’tiçpralot^hukrañ öiçt^heya**

*However, with this information, there would be this other person who is myself
who might eventually choose to begin saying things I never said,
might steer clear of certain doorways as I did not,
and befriend strangers I’ll never meet*

In the above stanza, the second line “*iùlá’št’axta twiam-mt’uo*” is a good example of the language’s morpho-semantic efficiency, given that the full literal translation is “*who theoretically might eventually go ahead and choose to begin making various statements unsaid before*”.

As I proceeded, I came across rather curious and innovative ways to use Ithkuil morphology to create semantic images and “scenes.” I found myself using the language’s capacity for stem-incorporation a lot more than I thought I would, allowing me to juxtapose seemingly incompatible ideas into single holistic concepts. Below is a single line excerpted from the lyrics which display some interesting uses of the morphology.

iuñk’âvwasêcilneu lčisuwa

“we leave a trail of banality behind us as we flee from ourselves”

The first word **iuñk’âvwasêcilneu** is quite interesting in its construction:

iu – ñk’â – [î]vw(a) – s – êc – iln – eu

DYN – inc.stem: ‘escape/flee’ – main.stem: ‘controllable.intangible.quality’ – PRX – UNQ_{2/3} – WAK_{1/1} – RSL/RPS

DYN = DYNAMIC Function, indicating an action as opposed to a state

inc.stem = incorporated stem: ‘escape/flee’

main.stem = main stem: ‘controllable.intangible.quality’

PRX = PROXIMAL Extension, indicating an ongoing event or situation

UNQ_{2/3} = suffix indicating that the concept expressed by the stem(s) is to be considered as being banal

WAK_{1/1} = suffix indicating that the concept being expressed leaves a wake/trail behind as it moves

RSL = RESULTATIVE Format, specifying the relationship between the incorporated stem and the main stem; in this case, that the main stem functions as a concurrent result of the incorporated stem, i.e., is caused by it but also occurs simultaneously with it

RPS = REPRESENTATIONAL Context, indicating that the word as a whole is to be considered as being metaphorical

Since the idea of something being banal is expressed by the UNQ_{2/3} suffix **-êc**, the suffix needs a stem to be affixed to. I have used a rather unusual stem **-îvw** which is a word referring to the intangible essence or quality of something, but in a manner which is volitionally determined or controllable, as opposed to being non-volitionally inherent. This implies that the protagonists are deliberately creating the banal quality in the process of fleeing.

The word **lčisuwa** is a personal reference adjunct (Ithkuil’s equivalent to personal pronouns) with the ENG_{1/1} affix (“avoiding X at all costs; running away from X”) prefixed to a personal referent form corresponding to “you(sg.) and I” in INDUCIVE case, the case of a party who willingly initiates the action named by the preceding verb, and who undergoes that self-initiated action themselves.

Finally, came the task of composing the lyrics to the last song directly in Ithkuil. I found myself thinking about my visit with the psychoneticists in Kiev, Ukraine, back in 2011. While there, I had been asked to create an Ithkuil word for “synaesthesia.” Belatedly, I did so and now decided to use it as the title of the song and the basic theme of the composition.

In researching the exact meaning of the word, I discovered that many scholars studying the phenomenon consider the word inappropriate and would prefer the term “ideaesthesia”, as the nature of synaesthesia does not really involve the mind translating one sense impression into another, but rather translating thoughts/ideas/concepts into sense impressions. Therefore, the Ithkuil word is **ôrödyagzou**, which literally translates as something like “*the concept (and wondrous experience thereof) of varied sets of sense impressions resulting from concurrent ideas/thoughts being considered.*”

The concept appears in the song lyrics contained within some very interesting (and powerful) words such as the following one-word refrain that appears repeatedly throughout the song:

uorödyoi'gzuxharçiamtixtou

The literal translation of the above word is something like: “*if there could be an act of embodiment of a new and wondrous synergistic expansion of synaesthesia*”, which I will word more naturally (for the eventual lyric sheet) as:

‘If one could embody an emergence of new synaesthesia’

So did writing a song directly in Ithkuil without reference to an English source cause me to “think in Ithkuil”? Not really. What I mostly did was browse through the lexicon until I'd find a root or stem that inspired me like "memory", then I'd browse for another word having nothing to do with the first word, e.g. “poison/venom.” That would give rise to a basic metaphor or simile in my mind such as "memories are poison."

I'd then start browsing through the list of derivational suffixes until I see something interesting or inspiring, e.g., a suffix meaning "container (full) of X". At that point my knowledge of the language's morphology would kick in to suggest a way of piecing all these elements together into a single word like **iumzixča'alekölšie** “*while putting memories into flasks marked poison.*”

Once created, that would inspire me to search for the next root/stem, the only criterion being that the selection should adhere to whatever theme/mood was subjectively emerging as I went on.

So the only "thinking in Ithkuil" I did was the stage where I let my mind dwell on what Ithkuil morphology makes possible and apply it to the stems and suffixes I had selected. Often, I wasn't pleased with the initial outcome, but it would give me another idea to try out. And so on, word-by-word, line-by-line.

As a curious side-note regarding the composition of this song, I actually managed (more or less) to craft the English translation of the Ithkuil lyrics into dactylic tetrameter and/or amphibrachic tetrameter verses! (Don't worry, I had to look up those terms, too.) Here is the first stanza of the song with its English translation:

lp'as udyakçtaggöpšie
Ārp'ačhal untuřšioęeo
ômpeisnaitoa ípkukdai'lie
iumzixča'alekölšie

Searching for ciphers to interpret one's senses
Fashioning sinews of shadow and sound
from tastes and smells that capture emotion
while memories are stored in flasks marked poison

While working on these lyrics, as is often the case when working on a major conlang translation effort, I discovered a few shortcomings in Ithkuil grammar, vocabulary and other morphology. During the process, I created over a dozen new lexical roots and at least four new suffixes, and most importantly, I determined the need for case-stacking (the ability to apply more than one case to a noun or noun phrase) and figured out a way to accomplish it morphologically without having to reformulate the existing grammar.

And now, at long last, my songwriting efforts are bearing fruit. Production of the first of the six songs is finished (the one translated from Italian no less!) and is now available for listening/viewing on YouTube. My music project is called Kaduatán (the Ithkuil word for “wayfarers”) and features our friend and famed conlanging hero David J. Peterson singing the lead vocals in Ithkuil, no less! The video features artwork by my brother Paul. (The full Ithkuil lyrics to the song with English translation and intralinear morphological analysis are available on the “Texts” page of the Ithkuil website.) Here's the link to the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJ6BcuwscfmM11pQp0gEX-g>

All in all, I recommend the attempt to write poetry (or at least song lyrics) to any conlanger as a way of discovering fascinating aspects of your conlang you might never have known were there.