

# An Introduction to Constructed Languages for Writers



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# Outline

Writing and Language – How to work a conlang into a story.

A “Naming Language” – What you need to create names for people, places and things

More on Grammar – What you need to create simple phrases (time permitting)

# References

Mark Rosenfelder, The Language Construction Kit (eBook) - Very basic, but a quick, useful introduction to conlanging. He has other eBooks that expand on elements of this one.

David Peterson, The Art of Language Invention - He did the languages for Game of Thrones. This is possibly the best 'textbook' you can get, although it will require some study to get through. (Have Wikipedia handy...)

Rochelle Lieber, Introducing Morphology (eBook) - OK, not *just* because she's from my alma mater, but because it gives you options when creating related words. For a naming language it is very useful.

J.C Catford, A Practical Introduction to Phonetics - A neat book full of exercises to help you learn how sounds are formed and how to pronounce sounds that other languages use, but english doesn't. Also, what if your aliens don't have lips? What sounds are lost to them? This book can help you figure that out.

# Language Adds Depth to a World

Each dimension you add to your world increases the richness of it

Language and culture are intertwined, but language is the part that we see / hear

Characters from different races and cultures have a distinct 'voice' because their language carries and expresses their culture

Creating the language that expresses a culture in your world helps you refine that culture

# Letting Language “Bleed Through”

Characters will tend to revert to their native language when surprised or under stress

Characters can use the words of the conversational language, but the syntax of their native language

Characters may stumble trying to find “the right word” in the conversational language to match a word or phrase in their native language

Puns *never* translate

# Code Switching

Bilingual characters may flip back and forth between languages in the same sentence.

To the brain, both languages are just 'language'. It can play mix and match with both vocabulary & syntax.

This can provide context when introducing words



# Stumbling Blocks

The kinds of words you probably shouldn't create...

Hziulquoigmnzah

Ycnágnnisssz

Zstylzhemghi

While true to the 'unimaginable' nature of the Elder Gods, these kinds of names are stumbling blocks that interrupt the reader's immersion in your work - even if, in time, the reader gets used to them.

*(And, yes, I like Lovecraft too, but...)*



# Orthography Can Help

If you have multiple languages, it helps if they are at least somewhat visually distinct. The reader should quickly learn to identify each language.

Fauth ma Čerst dauwič fortēn

Joit çèvetai Kenes en Lèisan

Wæson dan Thailna hylftöd toræst

Erkonum an'kirus to'pekot'al penum

These need not be dramatic, just simple clues. The [ ˇ ] marks Nethiri, [ ç ] & [ ` ] mark Çetrille, [ æ ] & [ ¨ ] mark Heltræg, and the [ ´ ] marks Querin.



# A Naming Language

If all you need are names for people, places, and things (and maybe the odd expletive...) then mostly what you need is to know how to build words.

- Phonology: What sounds does it have?
  - The joys of the IPA table
- Phonotactics: How do we build words?
  - Syllables, stress and intonation
- Morphology: Variations on the root word
  - Plurals, possessives, case, gender

# An Example From My Sordid Past

A naming language based on some 'placeholder' words dropped into a story and then forgotten.

- An alien race: the 'Yunkyin' (who are described as vaguely 'bear-like')
- A Yunkyin character: 'Akadjin'
- A Yunkyin board game: 'Radjnadjok'

# But I'm Writing...

Why does pronunciation matter?

As long as the reader *thinks* they can pronounce the words you're probably good.

Then again, you may sell that novel and have to go around the country giving readings. Best to be prepared.

# YouTube / Wikipedia Tag Team

Watch movies in different languages and get a feel for the different 'sounds'

Find one that resonates with your idea of what this language sounds like:

- 'Yunkyin': Chinese, Korean, Mongolian?
- 'Akadjin': Turkish, Arabic?
- 'Radjnadjok': Something Scandanavian?

Go to the Wikipedia pages on the winning language's phonology and shamelessly pilfer its phonetics and word structure. For more fun, play mix-n-match with different languages.

# The Winner

Hárkonarmál (verses 20-21)

## The Skaldic Project

I admit, it's mostly the reader's deep resonant voice, but I can see a bear-like race having that kind of deep, rich, slow speech.

The YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVA5fVe2rlk>

# A Simplified “Icelandic-ish” Phonology

## Consonants:

- Stops (plosives) : p/b, t/d, k/g
- Fricatives & such : h, x, f/v, s, þ/ð ('this' / 'then')
- Nasals, etc. : m, n, ng, l, r, j (/j/ ‘y’ sound)

## Vowels :

- á /au/ ‘cow’, æ /ai/ ‘bye’, a /a:/ ‘lager’
- é /<sup>ɪ</sup>ε/ ‘yet’, e /ε/ ‘bet’),
- ý/í /i/ “seen”, y/i /ɪ/ ‘bit’
- ó /ou/ ‘beau’ + ‘do’, o /ɔ/ ‘ottó’
- ú /u/ ‘do’, u /ʏ/ ‘glück’

# Intonation

*Not going to use it here, but it's an option*

Expands a language's phonetic range.

Tends to make a language more 'musical'

For example, Mandarin Chinese\*:

mā = mother (high tone)

má = hemp (rising)

mǎ = horse (falling-rising)

mà = scold (falling)

*(\*With apologies to native speakers of Chinese...)*



# Stress

Stress has many uses.

- Provides a language's 'rhythm'.
- Can be used to change pronunciation and/or meaning

Stress can be placed:

- On a specific syllable, e.g. the penultimate
- On the stem, (as in Old Norse)
- Irregularly

We'll mark stressed syllables with the 'acute' diacritical as desired (*i.e.* no 'rules', just an effect we can use.)

# It is usually more complex

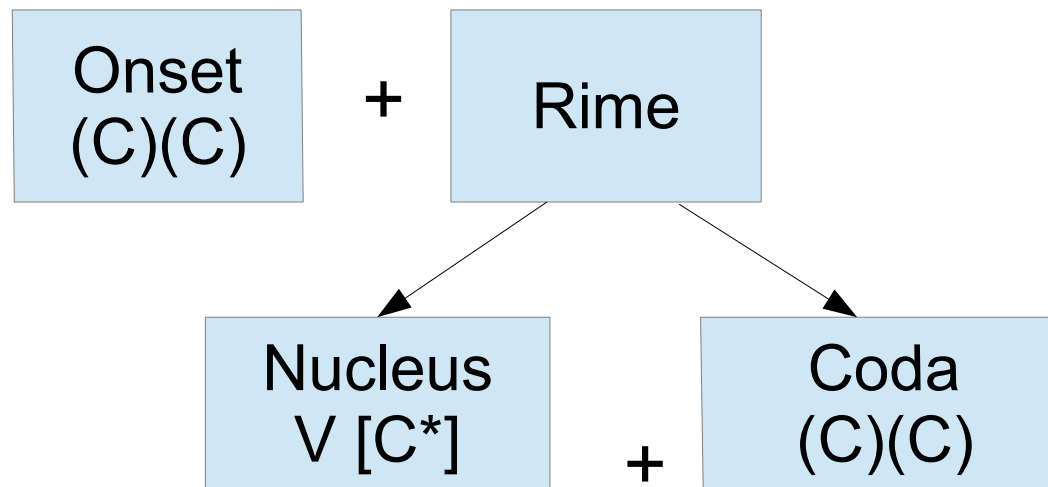
Phonemes can change based on context within a word.  
For example:

- Vowels can change pronunciation when following hard/soft or voiced/unvoiced consonants
- Digraphs can have unexpected pronunciations
- Consonants can be dropped, palatalized or become unvoiced

Languages have these quirks, but they are often invisible on the printed page. So, do you need them? Certainly, if you're doing readings, you need to be consistent in your pronunciation.

# Building Words

Syllables are used to place stress and intonation. Together with phonetics, these give a language its own unique sound.



\* Can be a “syllabic consonant” - m, n, r - depending on language

Let's use (C)V(C)(C), assume there's at least one consonant and we can't have two vowels in a row. (But languages evolve, so exceptions happen...)

# Our first words

Some random, sort-of-Old-Norse root words.

berg	/bɛrg/	noun	spear
geð	/gɛð/	verb	sing
hýr	/hir/	adj.	quick
mægr	/maigr/	verb	command
ven	/vɛn/	noun	god
sór	/sour/	noun	tip, or point
kyp	/kɪ:θ/	noun	wind
ragýr	/ragir/	noun	war
dys	/dɪ:s/	adj.	mad, insane
raðú	/ra:ðu/	noun	sword

# Basic Morphology

- Number – it can be more than just singular and plural
- Definite/indefinite distinctions
- Gender – Not always a thing, but the culture may demand it
- Possessives – Ownership, parts of things and groups
- Changing parts of speech – Turning verbs into nouns, etc.

# Number & 'Definiteness'

Only definiteness is marked. If *berg* is “[a] spear”, and (using 'ý—') *ýberg* is “the spear”

Pairs have a special place with these guys, so we have duality as well as plurality:

- '—a': *berga* is a “pair of spears”
- '—r': *bergr* is “more than two spears”

Just for fun...

- '—soď': *bergsoď* is the “an absence of spear”

So, “the pair of spears” would be *yberga*

# Pronouns & Gender

Let's assume gender marking is optional, but common:  
[unmarked] : gender neutral; “—n”: Male; “—l”: Female

References to mixed gender pairs/groups always use gender neutral.

Let's stick with simple 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, & 3<sup>rd</sup> person:

- 1<sup>st</sup>: æ (N), æn (M), æl (F)
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: el (N), eln (M), ell (F)
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: ko (N), kon (M), kol (F)

Pairs/plural's form with '—a' & '—r' suffix.

Reflexives form with 'kup—' prefix



# Possessives

There is the possibility of different forms of “possession”

- '—þý': Descendent: “Jack's child”
- '—hýa': Property: “Jack's ship”
- '—bar': A part of...: “Jack's eyes are blue”
- "—kór': A relationship, “Jack's friend”

*(Making the type of relationship explicit adds redundancy to a language, which aids in comprehension.)*

# Other useful productions...

## Verbs » Nouns

*geð* (“to sing”) + ‘—*ka*’ » *geðka*, (“singer”)

*geð* + ‘—*æ*’ » *geðæ* (“song”)

*mægr* (“to command”) + ‘—*as*’ » *mægras* (“command”)

## Adjectives » Adverb

*hyr* (“quick”) + ‘*va*—’ » *vahyr* (“quickly”)

## Adjectives » Nouns

*nys* (“good”) + ‘—*val*’ » *nysval* (goodness)

*hyr* (“quick”) + ‘—*val*’ » *hyrval* (“quickness”)

# “Yunkyin”

Akadjin mentions “hearing the Fates singing”, so

“Yun” becomes “Jun” (“Fate”)

- “kyin” sounds like a suffix, perhaps “Descendents of”?
- We have the “child of” possessive “pý”
- Make it plural and get “pýr”

“Junpýr » “Fate's Children”

## “Akadjin”

We don't have the /dʒ/ “dj” sound, so let's try /θ/ (“th”) “p” instead:

“Akapýn”

What a coincidence! ‘-pyn’ means “son of”, but “Aka” is a bit short for a name, so “Akan”, let’s say his given name is “Kýfe”:

“Kýfe Akanpýn” - “Kýfe, Son of Akan”

“Ælin”, daughter of “Mora” would be

Ælin Morapýl

How interesting! It appears that they trace lineage by descent along gender lines.

# “Radjnadjok”

Again, no /dʒ/ “dj” sound, besides we have this “Fates” thing going, so let’s ditch the whole word and play with the idea of what kind of game they might play.

Jungeðæ is “Fate-song”

And let's say “--tal” is a suffix meaning “a game”, then

Jungeðætal is the “Fate-Song-Game”

*(The Jungeðkar, “Fate-singers”, are a supernatural race that the Junþýr believe “sing” ones future. In the game, dice rolls replace the songs of the Jungeðkar.)*

This would also imply that, in this culture, the act of singing takes on a supernatural aspect.

# A Language Sketch

If you want simple phrases, greetings, proverbs and the like, then you need to add a bit of grammar

Building sentences: *Phrases and phrase order*

A feel for the action: *Verb tense, mode and aspect*

Nouns 'tarded up': *Cases, classes and agreement*

# A Bit of Grammar

Even simple phrases require some basic grammar

- Word order: SOV is most common (~40%), followed by SVO (~35%). The rest are in the single digits, except, oddly enough, for 'unfixed' which sits at ~14%.
- Phrase construction: do adjectives follow the nouns they modify or precede them?
- How do verbs express tense? Aspect? Modality?

How much of this you do is dependent on how complex you want sentences and phrases to be.



# Phrases

Phrases can be head initial or head final (*aka* 'prepositional' or 'postpositional' phrases)

“in the room” vs “the room in”

Japanese, for example, is entirely head-final

Do phrases come before or after the noun they modify?

“the ball in the room” vs “in the room the ball”

For simplicity, lets stick with the familiar.

# Case Marking

We can relax word order using noun case marking:

- '—an' = Nominative (Subject)
- '—yl' = Accusative (Object)
- '—of' = Dative (Indirect Object)

A language can have other cases that are used to build phrases by modifying nouns.

- locative = where ('—bep')
- temporal = when ('—myt')
- instrumental = with what ('—bar')
- ...

“The bench at the park” = “The bench park[loc] at”

# Verbs

## Tense:

- None. Tense is established by temporal case markings on nouns. (This is kind of in flux, more a thought experiment to see if it works. It will take them longer to express things, but they are slow, methodical thinkers. Yes, yes, they might be the Dornagin...)

## Aspect:

- '—(e)t': Completive: the action has (or will have) finished. (Which sort of implies it started in the past.)
- '—(o)s': Progressive: the action is ongoing

Mode will be done with auxilliary words/afixes, e.g. the imperative *kyr*.

# Nouns and Agreement

Not just an annoyance – it adds redundancy to a language, improving intelligibility

Some noun classes & their adjective markers:

- **Supernatural:** Gods, spirits - '—ven'
- **Powerful:** Sentient creatures - '—hja'
- **Innocent:** Plants, animals, insects - '—ma'
- **Inanimate:** rocks, wind, rain - '—lov'
- **Abstract:** 'morning', 'history', 'virtue' '—tre'

To really have fun, change the markers based on the noun's case (subject, object, etc.)

# Some short phrases

Svoharl nystre = “Good Morning”

- *svo* (before) + *harl* (noon), *nys* (good + *tre* abstract case)

Bysharl nystre = “Good Afternoon”

- *bys* (after) + *harl* (noon), *nys* (good + *tre* abstract case)

Hala mjar = “Fare well!”

- *Hala* (to fare), *mjar* (well)

Mys kae fand Jungeðkar = “May the fates be kind”

- *Mya* (optative mood), *kae* (to be, have the quality of), *fand* (kind, generous), [the] *Jungeðkar* (Fatesingers)