

Conlanging Questions and Resources

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Introduction

Basics of the language's context.

Culture:

Who speaks this language? What are their values, norms and worldview? What do they talk about in great detail, and what do they avoid or euphemise?

Environment:

Where do they live? What is their geography? Whom do they trade with? What other languages/cultures are they influenced by?

History:

How did this culture and language evolve? How has their culture and language changed from their older forms, and why?

Phonology/Orthography

This is where you'll get the feel of how your language looks/sounds, and decide how to notate/transliterate it. Click [here](#) to simulate how your language will look/sound with different phoneme frequencies and rules.

Consonants:

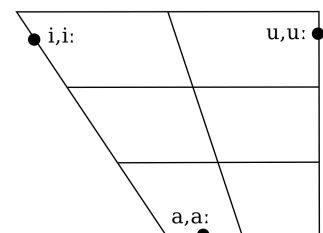
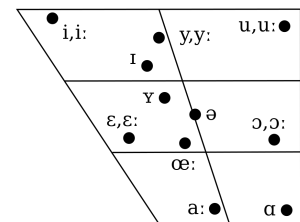
Where and how can consonants be articulated? English doesn't use guttural consonants, French doesn't use /θ/ (as in **thin**) or /ð/ (as in **this**), some languages use various kinds of clicks or implosives. What about voicing? Arabic has the voiced /b/, but not the unvoiced /p/. Make a list of which consonants are common/uncommon/absent, and how you'll write them. Consonants are often written in an IPA [chart](#).

Vowels:

Where and how can vowels be articulated? How many vowel qualities does your language have? Dutch has 11, while Arabic has only 3. What about other distinctions? Are there diphthongs (like ay or ow)? Long English doesn't use nasal vowels, though French does, Chinese and Thai have systems of tones, and many languages have long and short. How Since English only has those 5 vowel letters, you may want to use accents, double vowels, superscript, IPA symbols, or semivowels (like w and y) to fully describe your vowel set. However, don't go overboard. You probably don't need accented double vowels for every sound. Maybe write your most common sounds with plain English letters, and save the other features for the less common ones.

Syllables/Prosody:

What combinations of sounds (phonemes) are allowed at the beginning, middle, and end of syllables? How do phonemes affect each other (in English, /s/ at the end of a word is pronounced /z/ following a vowel or voiced consonant)? How does your



language use stress, intonation, and rhythm?

Morphology

This is where you'll decide how to turn sounds into words, and generate some of the words and morphemes which belong to closed classes. Feel free to add/delete/modify sections and tables here according to what makes sense for your language.

You also get to decide which features of your language are more **isolating** (each morpheme gets its own word, like in Mandarin or Yoruba) more **agglutinative** (words are inflected, but each morpheme stays separate, like in Japanese or Turkish), or more **fusional** (morphemes tend to be fused together, like in French or Russian). Remember, your language has probably changed over time. English grammar used to be quite fusional, as shown in its pronoun system, and is now more isolating (though its derivational morphology looks quite agglutinative: cf "anti-dis-establish-ment-arian-ism").

Roots:

What is the structure of the building blocks of meaning? Can roots combine to make compound roots? Make a list of a few simple and compound roots (this is where the generator comes in handy). Once it's big enough, you may want to think about root/word families.

Parts of Speech/Derivational Morphology:

What parts of speech are there? How can you use inflection to create different words from roots? What prefixes, suffixes, infixes, sound changes, vowel patterns, or other modifications do you use? (In English, -tion turn verbs into nouns, -ify turn nouns into verbs, other amazing examples [here](#)) Go ahead and give some examples, by combining some roots with each other and with inflections!

Adpositions:

What small words does your language use? English doesn't have many inflections, so it's heavy on prepositions (to, for, with), and auxiliary verb forms (have, had, will, going), with only one unambiguous dedicated postposition (i.e. ago). There are also circumpositions, as in the famous French "ne _____ pas", or the English "as _____ as". These words are often monomorphemic and underivable, but not always: Hebrew "oti" (me) is made of "et" (direct object) + "ani" (I).

Nouns:

If you have them, how do you mark them? Do nouns have genders? (If so, how many?) Cases? (which ones?) Plurals? (other numbers?) What else can you show on the noun? What prefixes, suffixes, infixes, sound changes, vowel patterns, or other modifications are used? Remember, it's natural for some words and/or word families to be irregular.

Pronouns/Classifiers:

How do you reference people and things? How are pronouns (if you have) categorized? Person? (how many?) Singular/Plural? (what about dual, or other numbers?) Gender? (how many?) Case?

Animacy? Proximity? Inclusivity? Dimensions? Type of thing? Remember, pronouns may preserve features of the older form of your language; notice how English distinguishes grammatical case in pronouns but not in nouns. Go ahead; make your own tables! In English, we use:

Personal (by no means exhaustive - think of what cases your language uses! Examples [here](#))
Remember, your language might use inflection or articles for some/all cases.

| Person | Nominative? | Accusative? | Genitive? | Possessive? | Others? |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1? | <i>I</i> | <i>me</i> | <i>my</i> | <i>mine</i> | <i>for/at/with me</i> |
| 2? | <i>thou</i> | <i>thee</i> | <i>thy</i> | <i>thine</i> | <i>for/at/with thee</i> |
| 3 masculine? | <i>he</i> | <i>him</i> | <i>his</i> | <i>his</i> | <i>for/at/with him</i> |
| 3 feminine? | <i>she</i> | <i>her</i> | <i>her</i> | <i>hers</i> | <i>for/at/with her</i> |
| 3 inanimate? | <i>it</i> | <i>it</i> | <i>its</i> | <i>its</i> | <i>for/at/with it</i> |
| 1 plural? | <i>we</i> | <i>us</i> | <i>our</i> | <i>ours</i> | <i>for/at/with us</i> |
| 2 plural? | <i>you</i> | <i>ye</i> | <i>your</i> | <i>yours</i> | <i>for/at/with ye</i> |
| 3 plural? | <i>they</i> | <i>them</i> | <i>their</i> | <i>theirs</i> | <i>for/at/with them</i> |
| Query? | <i>who</i> | <i>whom</i> | <i>whose</i> | <i>whose</i> | <i>for/at/with whom</i> |
| Others? | | | | | |

Non-Personal (by no means exhaustive - think of what categories your language uses!)

| | | query | demonstrative | | | quantifier | | | | |
|------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| | | | proximal | medial | distal | definite | elective | universal | alternative | negatory |
| determiner | | which/ what | this/ these | that/ those | yon/ yonder | some | any/ whichever | every/each/ all | another | no |
| Pro-noun | human | who | him/her/them | | | someone/ somebody | anyone/ anybody/ whoever | everyone/ everybody/ all | another/ someone else | no one/ nobody |
| | non-human | what | this / these | that/ those | yon/ yonder | something | anything/ whatever | everything/ all | another/ something else | nothing |
| | dual | which | these | those | yonder | one | either/ whichever | both | the other | neither |
| | plural | | | | | some | any/ whichever | each/all of them | another | none |
| Pro-adverb | place | where | here | there | yonder | somewhere | anywhere | everywhere | elsewhere | nowhere |
| | source | whence | hence | thence | | | | | | |
| | goal | whither | hither | thither | | | | | | |
| | time | when | now | then/ coming | yore (past) | sometime | anytime/ whenever | forever/ always | another time | never |
| | manner | how | hereby thus | thereby | | somehow | anyhow/ however | every way | otherwise | no way |
| | reason | why | herefore | therefore | | for some reason | | | | |

Verbs:

How do you conjugate a verb? Tense? (How many?) Aspect? Mood? Voice? Directionality? Evidentiality? Other? All? None? English conjugation relies heavily on auxiliaries (will, would, was, going, et c.), rather than inflection, so tables do not illustrate much. If verb conjugation is mostly **isolating** (like in English or Mandarin) move this section over to Syntax. If conjugation is **agglutinative** or **fusional**, what prefixes, suffixes, infixes, sound changes, vowel patterns, or other modifications are used? Remember, it's natural for some verbs (especially auxiliaries such as to be, to have, to go) to be irregular.

[Note how English got messed up when the singular 2nd person (thou) was lost and replaced by the plural 2nd person (you). Think about how your language has gotten messy.]

[Note also that for a more naturalistic **fusional** paradigm, you can run an **agglutinative** one through the [Sound Change Applier](#).]

Eg To Be (pick a couple of common irregular ones, a regular one from each big family)

| <i>Which tenses/aspects/etc do you have?</i> | <i>Past Perfect?</i> | <i>Present?</i> | <i>Future?</i> | <i>Other Tenses?</i> |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------------|
| <i>What pronouns do you use?</i> | | | | |
| <i>1 - I</i> | <i>was</i> | <i>am</i> | <i>will be</i> | |
| <i>2 - thou</i> | <i>wast</i> | <i>art</i> | <i>wilt be</i> | |
| <i>3 - s/he/it</i> | <i>was</i> | <i>is</i> | <i>will be</i> | |
| <i>1 plural - we</i> | <i>were</i> | <i>are</i> | <i>will be</i> | |
| <i>2 plural - you</i> | <i>were</i> | <i>are</i> | <i>will be</i> | |
| <i>3 plural - they</i> | <i>were</i> | <i>are</i> | <i>will be</i> | |

Other parts of Speech:

Are other parts of speech (in English: things like adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, articles, et c.) conjugated/declined to agree with nouns and/or with each other? What other grammatical information is communicated with inflection?

Lexicon

How does the language refer to the following concepts? Which use words? Which use phrases? Which does your language not have any words for? Which does your language have several words for? Which words are more general than English? Which words are more specific than English? Remember, many of these words will be derivations using your roots/inflections, or inventing words for them they will give you new roots/inflections to add.

Think about what part(s) of speech your language would use to refer to the concept. Just because something is a noun/verb/adjective/whatever in English does not mean it will be expressed that way in your language.

Concepts in square brackets are the ones that I imagine will vary most between languages, but the more you add/delete/modify the way your language categorizes the world, the more your language will have its own character.

Make sure your language can express all of these:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_semantic_metalanguage

As you come up with words, you can delete them from this list and enter them [here](#).

Eventually, this whole section might just be a link.

Function:

e.g. greeting/goodbye, welcome, please, thank you, sorry, yes, no, oh, [grammatical/auxiliary?] + what other in your language?

Acts:

Go

e.g. walk, run, ride, climb, swim, jump, dance, fall, stop, sit, stand, fast, slow + what other in your language?

Do

e.g. make, use, eat, drink, wash, open, close, push, pull, fix, break, draw, help, throw, catch, bend, burn, hit, fight, hurt, kill, copy, lift, drop, give, share, sell, mix, collect, spread, join, divide + what other in your language?

Act

e.g. sing, cry, touch, play, agree, live, grow, age, die, laugh, try, kiss, hug + what other in your language?

Be

e.g. have, want, need, care, see, hear, feel, think, know, learn, believe, hope, can, love, hate, imagine, sleep, dream, respect + what other in your language?

Feelings

e.g. happy, sad, angry, excited, silly, funny, serious, scared, brave, surprised, proud, tired, energetic, pain, healthy, sick + what other in your language?

Things:

Nature

e.g. water, rain, rock, earth, wind, sky, cloud, sun, moon, star, fire, snow, ice, thunder, lightning, storm, [terrain: mountains, valleys, plains, rivers, lakes, oceans?] [plants: roots, trees, leaves, flowers, seeds?], [animals: birds, fishes, bugs, work-animals, food-animals, furs, skins, blood, bone, organs?] + what other in your language?

Human

e.g. person, adult, baby, child, settlement, city, building, roof, wall, floor, entrance, room, home, bed, blanket, [family: parents, grandparents, siblings, close family members, extended family members?], [foods/drinks: meats, grains, vegetables, fruits, spices, cookware, cooking?], [religious: gods, spirits, souls, heros, history, relics, prayer, sanctuary, clergy, medicine, magic?], [transportation: road, ship, carriage, pack-animal?], [war: weapons, warriors, police, armies, generals, commanders?], [occupation: trades, professions, currency?], [politics: leaders, laws, bureaucrats, governments?] + what other in your language?

Body

e.g. head, hair, face, eye, nose, mouth, ear, voice, chest, breath, arm, hand, finger, leg, foot, toe, [clothing: skirts, breeches, scarves, footwear, headwear?] + what other in your language?

Speech

e.g. say, name, word, story, message, swear, idea, command, request, ask, answer, + what other in your language?

Time

e.g. moment, day, night, morning, evening, year, [calendar: months, seasons, festivals?] + what other in your language?

Descriptive:

Concrete

e.g. point, line, triangle, square, circle, edge, centre, hot/cold, loud/quiet, dirty/clean, smooth/rough, wet/dry, hard/soft, sharp/dull, dark/light, [colours?], + what other in your language?

Abstract

e.g. true/false, same/different, strong/weak, good/bad, beautiful/ugly, easy/difficult, rare/common, expensive/cheap, simple/complicated, smart/stupid, important/trivial, old/new, moral/immoral, safe/dangerous, mean/nice, privileged/ignoble + what other in your language?

Locative

e.g. up, down, forward, back, in, out, on, off, around, over, under, behind, front, across, before, after, beginning, end, previous, next, near, far, [directions: north/south/east/west, port/starboard, left/right?] + what other in your language?

Quantity

e.g. all, none, some, most, part, only, almost, one, two, three, more, less, many, [measurements: number system, big/little, short/tall, long/short, narrow/wide, breadth, weight, volume?] + what other in your language?

Syntax

Now that you have some words, let's put them together!

Alignment:

Accusative or Ergative? English treats "I broke **her**" and "**she** broke" differently, distinguishing between the subject of a verb (she) and the object (her). Many languages differentiate between actors and experiencers instead, saying the equivalent of "**her** broke" or "**her** fell".

Statements:

How do you say a basic sentence? Are some word orders preferred over others? English tends towards (the Subject)-(Verbs)-(the Object) [SVO] or, less commonly, (the Object)-(is Verbed by)-(the Subject) [OVS]. You can use any order you want, or not have subjects and objects at all! Make sure to include how the inflections and adpositions you came up with are used.

Phrases:

Which comes first, the adjective or the noun? What about numbers, articles, prepositions, and adverbs? If there are multiple parts of speech within a Noun or Verb phrase, in what order do they typically go? Remember, more inflection can sometimes mean more flexible word order. Can you use non-traditional word order for emphasis or poetics?

Arguments:

What happens if there are more subjects? (eg. "I was fighting." -> "Mary and I were fighting [each other]." -> "Mary and I were fighting [the enemy].") More objects? (eg. "Mary tells." -> "Mary tells the story." -> "Mary tells the story of creation." -> "Mary tells the story of creation to the children.") Make sure to include how the inflections and adpositions you came up with are used.

Clauses:

How do you join two or more clauses (eg [it was the best of times]; [it was the worst of times], [give me liberty] or [give me death])? Are there conjunctions (eg and, also, but)? Disjunctions (or, if not)? How do you make subclauses (eg [the man {that I used to date} is a two-timer])? Remember, you can use word order, adpositions, and/or inflections.

Questions/Answers:

How do you request confirmation or additional information? How do you respond to questions? Remember, you can use word order, adpositions, and/or inflections.

Requests/Commands:

How do ask politely? Forcefully?

Sample Sentences

Get a feel for putting all the aspects together

(for some inspiration, try clicking [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#))

| English | [Language] | Gloss (word-for-word) |
|---------|------------|-----------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Style/Pragmatics

How is the language used?

Register/Politeness:

How is academic/formal language different from vernacular? How do you speak to superiors versus to your equals?

Metaphor Systems:

In English, ACTIONS are OBJECTS (I can **give** help/advice, **take** a break/look, **make** a promise/deal, et c.), WORDS are CONTAINERS (I can/can't **put** my idea **into** words, her words are **pregnant/hollow**, I could/couldn't **get** a lot of meaning **out of** the poem), and many others. What metaphors does your language use, and how?

Figures of speech:

What sayings, idioms, and stock phrases are there? Remember, these phrases are often archaic (eg. "once upon a time"), nonliteral ("that's how the cookie crumbles"), or corrupted ("God be with you" -> "goodbye"), and often rely on euphemisms ("kick the bucket") and/or metaphors ("actions **speak** louder than words", "don't judge a **book** by its **cover**"). Some inspiration here:

<http://users.elite.net/runner/jennifers/abouttranslatinggreetings.htm>.

<http://blog.ted.com/40-idioms-that-cant-be-translated-literally/>

Sample Texts

Languages are especially rich when there are bodies of text for speakers to quote from. Do they have scripture? Famous poems? Folk tales?

| English | [Language] | Gloss (word-for-word) |
|---------|------------|-----------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

(Bonus - Gesture/Paralinguistics:)

Wait, you've finished all that and you're still going? Alright, how about how non-verbal communication works? In North America, we hug our friends, clap after performances, shake hands with acquaintances, bow at the waist before royalty, nod in agreement, give the "thumbs up" when we're happy and the "middle finger" when we're angry, wink to our confidantes, tilt our heads (because it's rude to point), click our tongues in disapproval, and many more.

Okay, now go back and tinker with it! Add exceptions and hypercorrections. Add more ways to

modify verbs. Add more roots and combine/infect old ones to make new words. Write out more complex sentences. Write out more idioms, expressions, and texts. Figure out how the different dialects deviate from the 'standard' version of the language in their phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax, and pragmatics. Finally, ask yourself some [tough questions](#):