

Borrowing a Language 101

Pertti Palo

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Land acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge and honor the Miami, Delaware, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, and Shawnee people, on whose ancestral homelands we are today and/or on whose ancestral homelands I have worked on this presentation.

Housekeeping and Warnings

- ▶ I want to keep this a safe space of mutual respect.
- ▶ The organisers told me I should tell you, that I may swear during this presentation.
- ▶ Personally, I find it more important to give you a content warning concerning topics such as colonization, oppression, pejoratives, etc.

- ▶ Please feel free to ask questions at any point.
- ▶ There will also be time for discussion and questions afterwards.
I do not intend to fill the full hour with just me talking.

Outline

- ▶ Today: Borrowing a Language 101
 - ▶ Housekeeping and warnings
 - ▶ Who am I and why am I here?
 - ▶ Case study: Announ World
 - ▶ Tentative principles for choosing languages
 - ▶ Couple of things about language trees
 - ▶ Some ideas to toss around
- ▶ Tomorrow: Ideas for Fantastic ((un)real) Speech
 - ▶ Dragon speech!
 - ▶ Bird people!
 - ▶ Speech and magic!

Who's this guy?



- ▶ Pertti Palo
- ▶ I've got a couple of degrees loosely speaking in engineering.
- ▶ I've also got a PhD in Phonetics.
- ▶ I have no formal qualifications in today's topic, but I do know a lot about speech production, but...

What lead me here?

- ▶ I am not a text linguist but rather a phonetician and a speech researcher.
- ▶ When I say 'language' I mainly mean spoken language today.
- ▶ Besides a speech researcher with 20+ years of experience, I've been an RPG enthusiast for 30+ years.
- ▶ Recently I've also started training as an oral storyteller which has some interesting connections with RPGs but also with science.

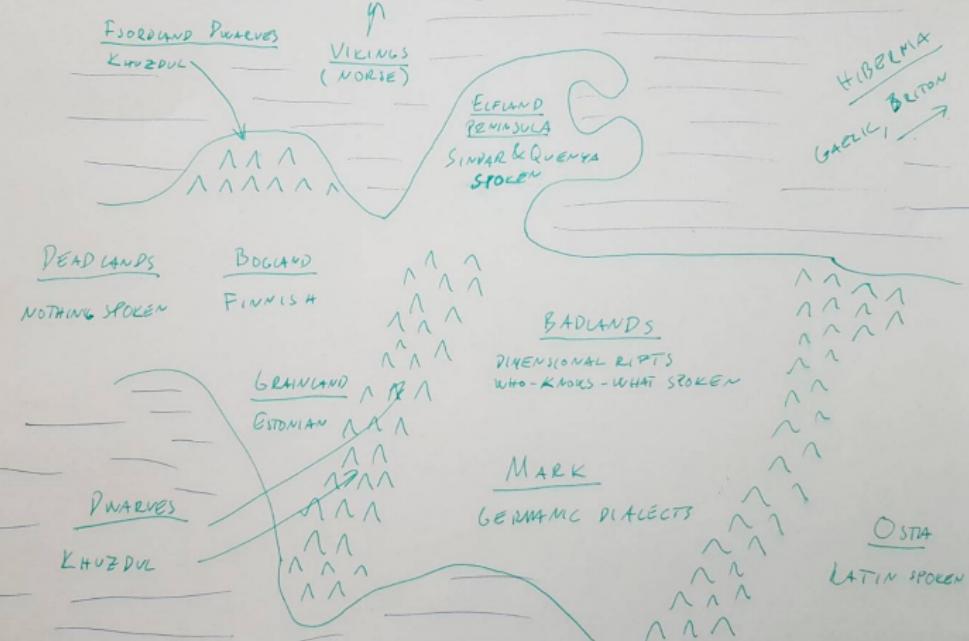
Announ (my world – and multiverse)

- ▶ It all started with wanting to improve D&D.
- ▶ No, not the current one, the 1980's one.
- ▶ Anyhow, I also had some very nice (Finnish) magazines with good adventures that I wanted to combine into an open ended campaign and for some reason decided against running it in any Known World.
- ▶ So enter Announ World.
 - ▶ First drawn to the requirements of my campaign idea.
 - ▶ Later expanded with help from the old world building mailing list (hello 90's), the MythoPoet sheets, and the excellent "Top Down and Bottom Up world designing" article.
 - ▶ I stole a good deal of the coast lines from real world maps by tracing them on tracing paper and so it'll surprise nobody that I also figured that I would use real world languages for the people who live on Announ and in the surrounding Metaverse.

People's and languages of Announ

- ▶ Quite early on I figured that while emulating J.R.R. Tolkien is all fine and dandy, I wanted to be able to run the game next week rather than in the next life. So instead of designing my own languages from scratch, I decided to use existing ones.
- ▶ I already had access to three and had heard somewhere, or more probably read in the LotR, about language family trees and such.
- ▶ The players were Finnish, so it was an easy choice to choose that as the majority language for the initial area of adventuring.
- ▶ Southern neighbours got assigned Estonian for obvious reasons and Celtic languages went to a misty archipelago in the northern sea (and their transworld buddies), Norse or something similar to a colder island further north, and the local, by now somewhat defunct, empire spoke Latin.

Regions around Suomaa in Announ



Tentative principles for choosing languages I

Don't take or use what is not yours – at least not without permission.

- ▶ In private – i.e. if you are not publishing – you can use (almost) whatever.
- ▶ It's still a good – and even a useful – idea to remember that real world languages come with people, culture and history attached to them.

Tentative principles for choosing languages II

In public, get permission:

- ▶ This probably rules out a lot of the ready made constructed languages.
- ▶ It also means that if the community who's language you are about to use is in some way vulnerable – especially colonised or oppressed, you should get permission from the community.
- ▶ To get permission, have a discussion, a dialogue. It matters how a language is presented in fiction and therefore how real people are reflected in fiction.
- ▶ Major languages are probably a safer bet in this way, but be aware that dialects and languages are a fluid thing and some dialects effectively come with the same challenges as vulnerable languages.

Tentative principles for choosing languages III

So what to borrow then? It depends on (at least):

- ▶ The above considerations
- ▶ Do you want chronological consistency?
- ▶ Do you mind mixing regular languages and constructed ones?
- ▶ What's the world like?
 - ▶ Do you want to match like for like? Norse spoken by Viking-like folks, Latin by the dominant empire?
 - ▶ How about the environment? A lot of language is concerned with weather, climate, vegetation, animals, and land forms.
 - ▶ What sort of historical relationships between communities do the languages reflect?
 - ▶ Do you want technologically advanced Aztec speakers in an otherwise medieval world where something like modern English is used by the less advanced people?

Not only branching from ancestors

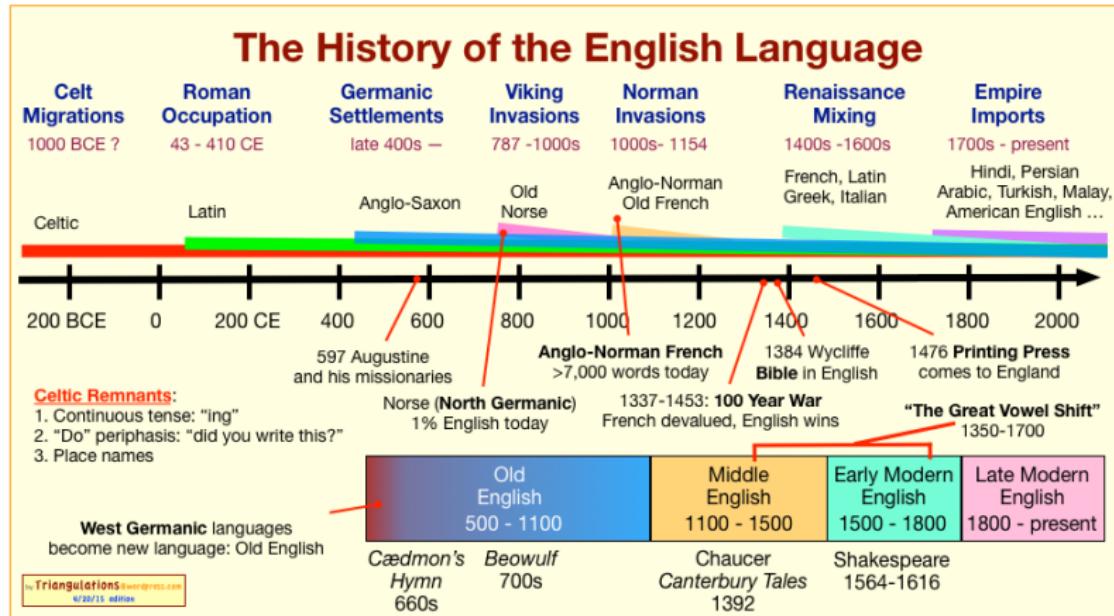
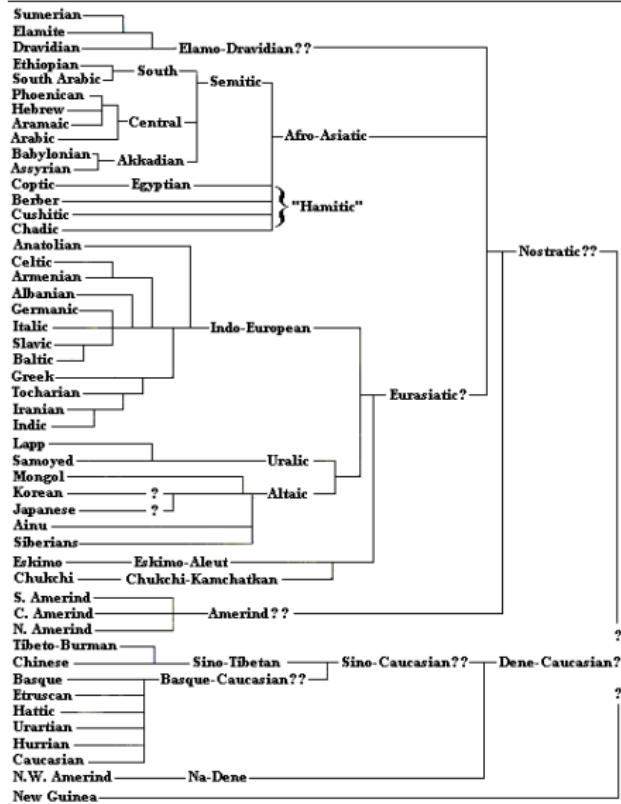


Image from Triangulations blogger Sabio Lantz's blog post

Beware of pejoratives and other problems



Some ideas to play around with

- ▶ If the world is magical, language can be too:
 - ▶ Unholy, vowel rich language (cf. Moorcock): hääyöaie (i.e. you can do this with Finnish)
 - ▶ "Guttural, evil language" may be a getting a bit old.
- ▶ Homophone words (think 'for' and 'four') and homonyms (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homonym> for details) and other plays on words can be part of a story ("Pedo mellon a minno.")
 - ▶ Mix this with dialects and you can produce a pretty solidly confusing situation.
 - ▶ Working these into game play may not be the easiest though.
- ▶ Whistled languages
- ▶ Singing

Thank you!

Let's talk!

Acknowledgements

- ▶ Again, the people who's ancestral land we are on.
- ▶ Sabio Lantz's blog post
[https://triangulations.wordpress.com/2014/09/30/
the-history-of-the-english-language-a-diagram/](https://triangulations.wordpress.com/2014/09/30/the-history-of-the-english-language-a-diagram/)
- ▶ Wikipedia
- ▶ All the good folk mentioned in passing.
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