

Borrowing a Language 101 & Ideas for ((Un)Real) Speech

Pertti Palo

29 July 2022

Land acknowledgement

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

Housekeeping and Notes on content

- ▶ I want to keep this a safe space of mutual respect.
 - ▶ There will be discussion of topics such as colonization, oppression, pejoratives, etc. in this presentation.
 - ▶ The workshop part that starts in about an hour is free of such content on my part.
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- ▶ 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 45 mins with just me talking.
 - ▶ However, we may end up using the discussion time during the presentation.

Outline

- ▶ Part I: Borrowing a Language 101
 - ▶ Housekeeping and warnings
 - ▶ This slide
 - ▶ Who am I and why am I here?
 - ▶ Case study: Announ World
 - ▶ Tentative principles for choosing languages
 - ▶ Couple of things about language trees
 - ▶ Discussion if we didn't already do it
- ▶ Part II: Ideas for Fantastic ((un)real) Speech
 - ▶ Dragon speech!
 - ▶ Bird people!
 - ▶ Speech and magic!
 - ▶ You get to have your own take on this - It's a workshop

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 Borrowing a Language, but I do know a lot about speech production, and...

I do have some background

- ▶ 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 and science.

What lead me here?

- ▶ 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 (Magus) 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...

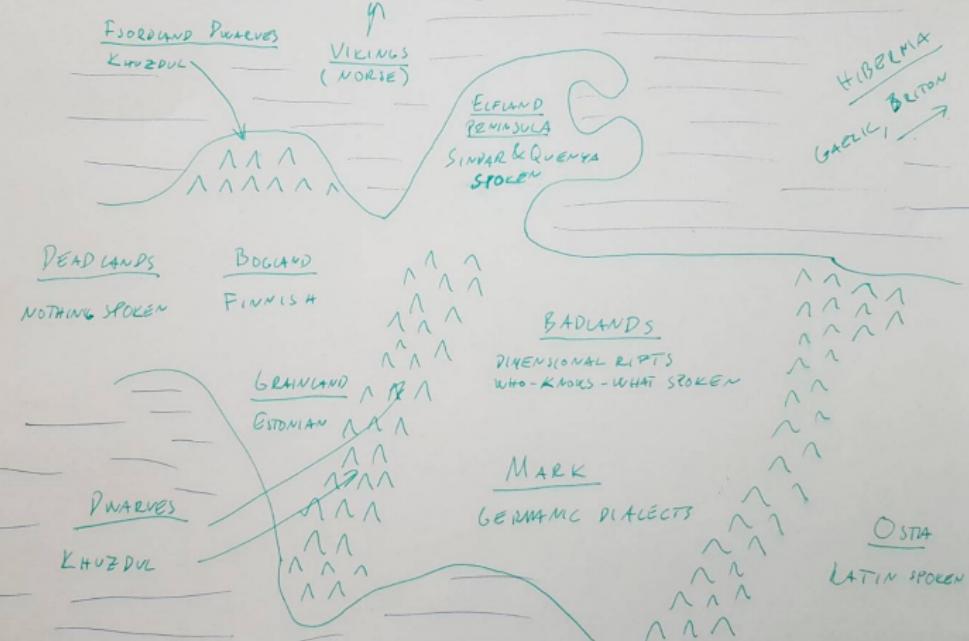
Announ (my world – and multiverse)

- ▶ 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 and off I went with that.

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, physical and social environment, 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, because 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?

And...

Tentative principles for choosing languages IV

How do these factors mesh with the story you/we want to tell?

- ▶ 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. And speech may be affected by environmental factors.
- ▶ What sort of historical relationships between communities do the languages reflect?
- ▶ How about contrasting with history as it happened? 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

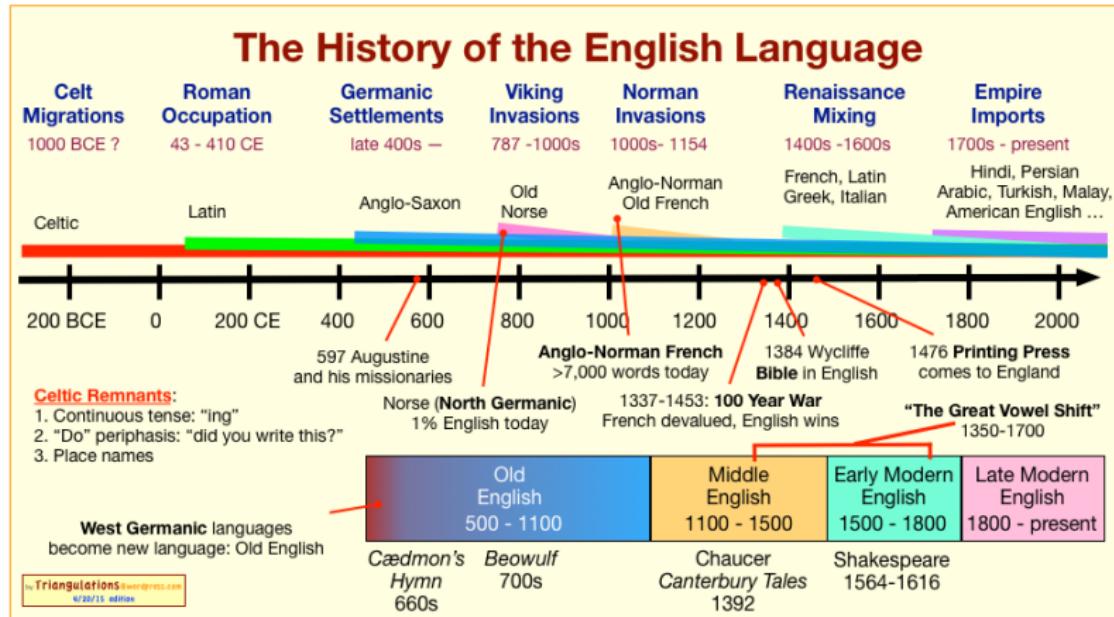
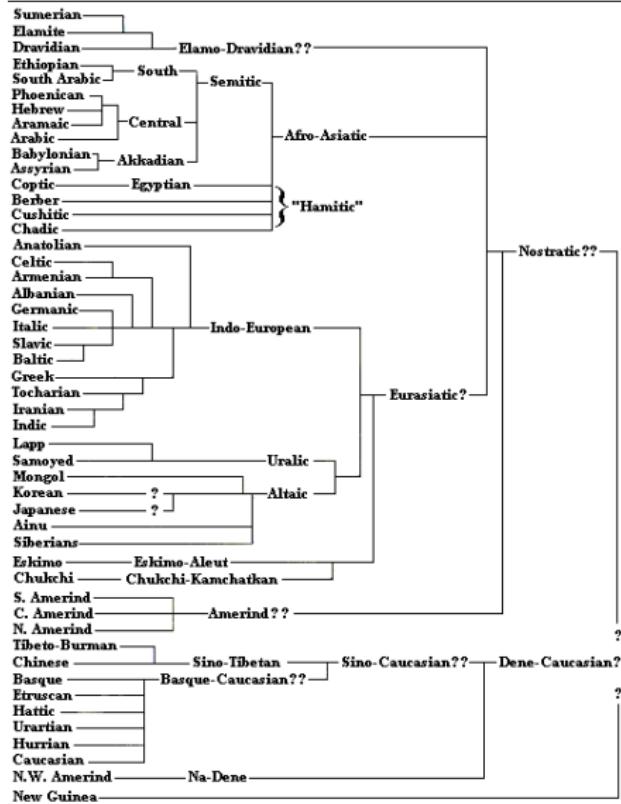


Image from Triangulations blogger Sabio Lantz's blog post

Beware of pejoratives and other problems



Acknowledgements

- ▶ Again, the people who's ancestral land I have worked 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 is a lovely thing.
- ▶ All the good folk mentioned in passing and some that I've forgotten.
- ▶ Copyrighted work remains the property of the legal copyright holders.
- ▶ My work has been supported by a grant from Säätiöiden Post Doc pooli (they don't have an English name) / The Emil Aaltonen foundation.

And you! Thank you!

Let's talk!
(and have a break in a minute)

Part II

Ideas for ((Un)Real) Speech

What we'll do

- ▶ Work as one or more groups with a maximum of 6 in total.
- ▶ I'll introduce the story seeds.
- ▶ We'll have about 25 minutes for working on a story as the whole group or stories in smaller group.
- ▶ In interest of keeping to the schedule, each group will work on only one story seed.
- ▶ We'll end with a very quick sharing and feedback in the last 20 mins.

The seeds

- ▶ Dragon speech and physics (such as they are) and the consequences to the world or story
- ▶ Humanoids who do not use sound as a means of communication (and possibly can not perceive it)
- ▶ Social and/or physical environment of speech and language in a world or story

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