

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

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 I have worked on this presentation.

## 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.

## Other Housekeeping

- ▶ 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...

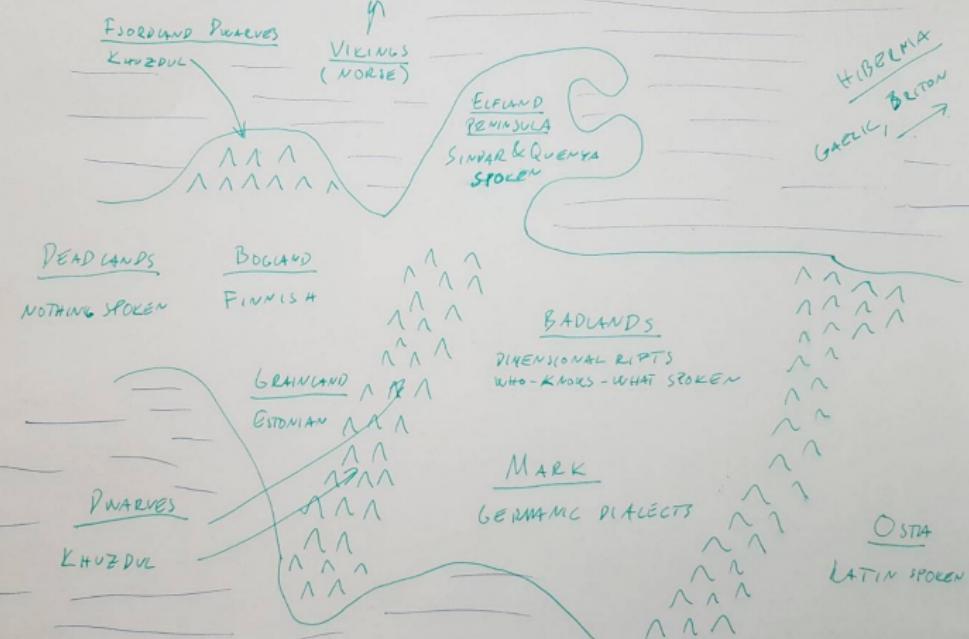
## Announ (my world – and multiverse)

- ▶ 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.

## 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.
- ▶ Major languages are probably a safer bet in this way, but let's 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

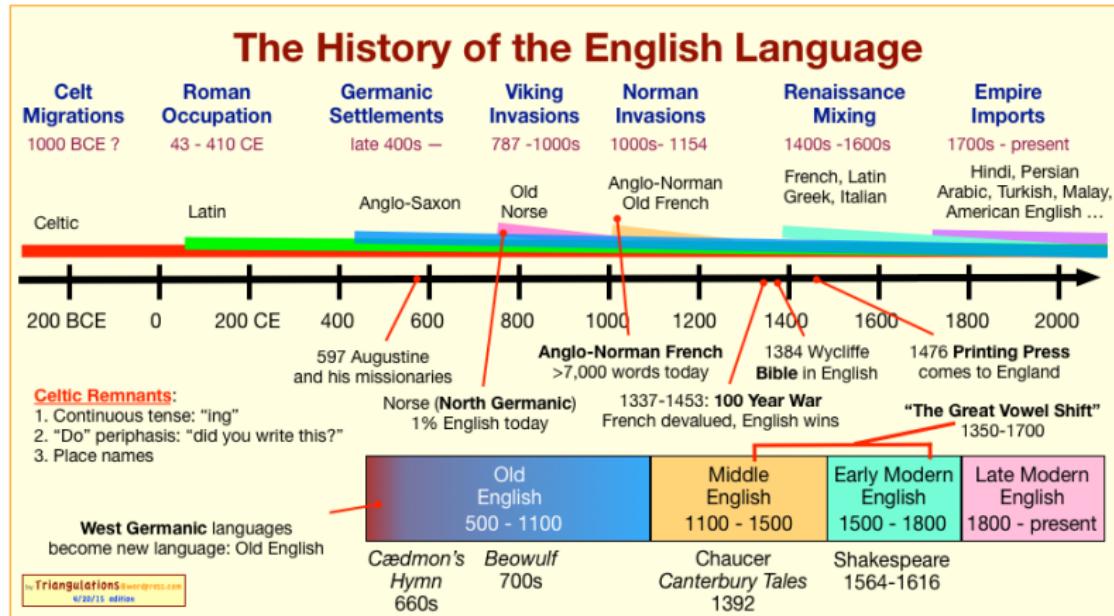
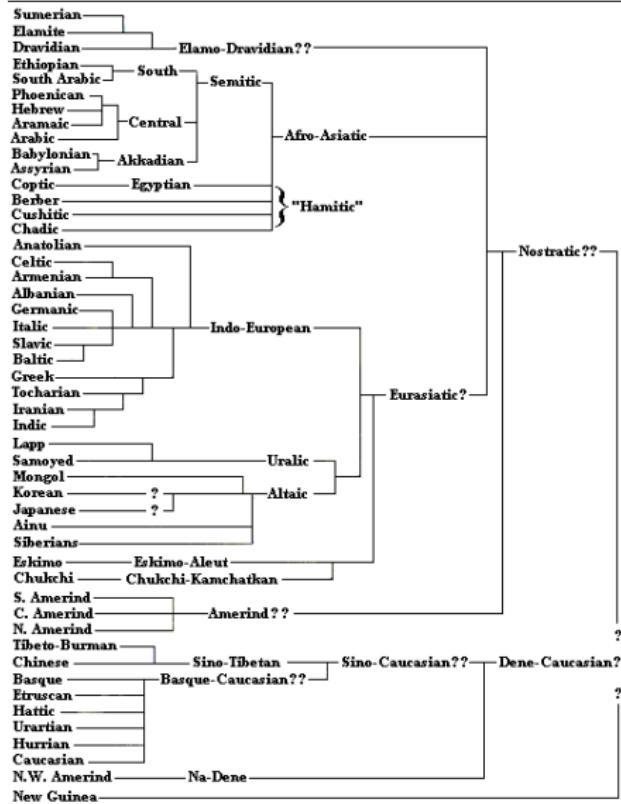


Image from Triangulations blogger Sabio Lantz's blog post

# 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/>
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Last year's excellent participants.
- ▶ 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!

Aaaand 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).
- ▶ The base code of reality being a spoken (/speakable) programming language.
- ▶ 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" was not a great idea to start with.
- ▶ 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