

THE LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY OF PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES

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EmpireJS 2015

jenna.is/empirejs15



zeigenvector



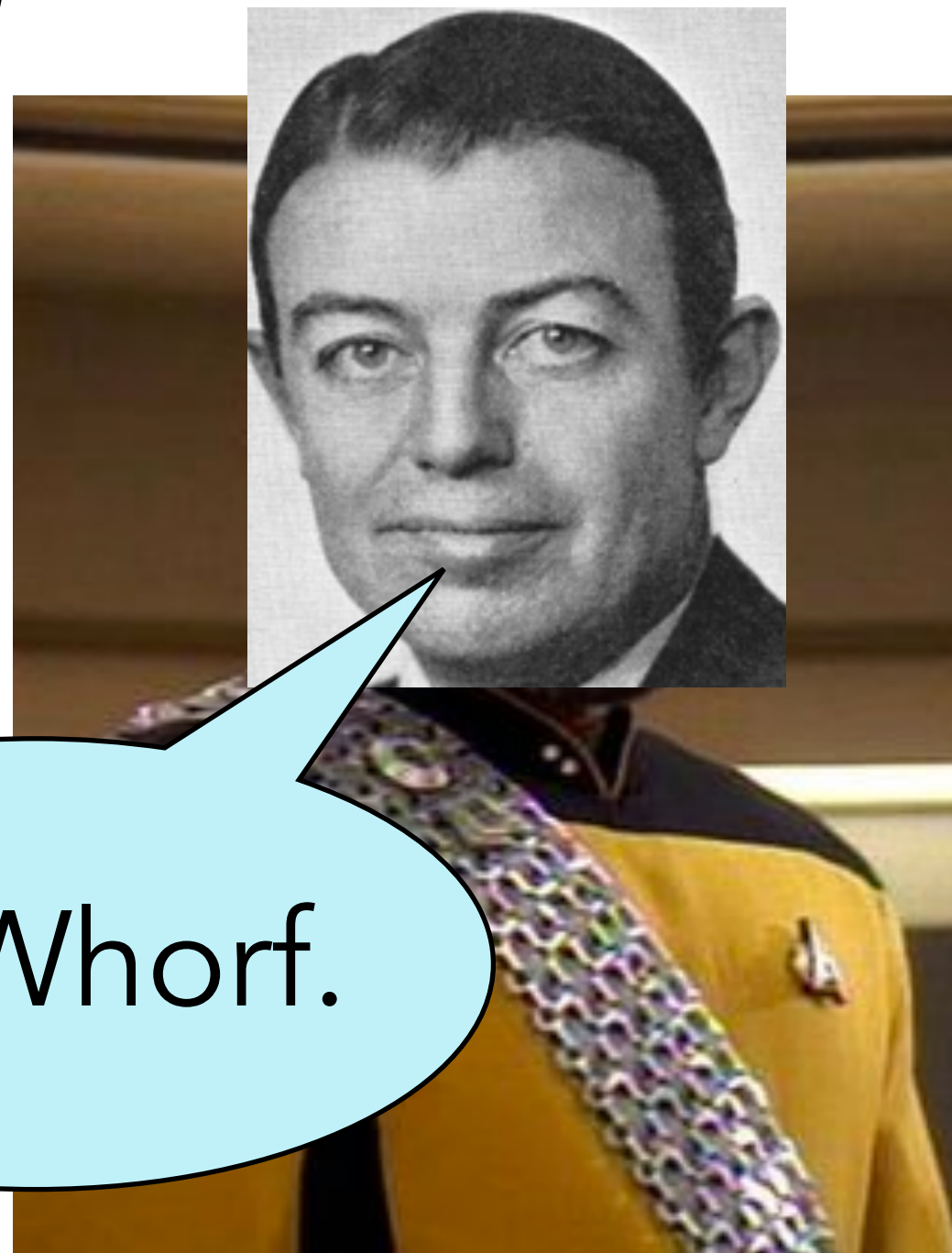
jennazee

1. Linguistic Relativity
2. ... and Programming Languages?
3. Previous allusions
4. How it applies
5. Implications

I'm Sapir.



I'm Whorf.



SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

The languages you speak
{determine | influence} the way
you think.

SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

The languages you speak
~~{determine | influence}~~ the way
you think.

SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS



Green

Blue

SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS



Green

Grue

Blue

But what about the

JavaScripts

????????????

Proposal: The programming languages we know strongly influence the way we think about programming.

Programming languages create
and manipulate the space,
rather than just describe it.

“Programming languages,
because they were designed for
the purpose of directing
computers, offer important
advantages as tools of thought.”

Kenneth Iverson, “Notation as a Tool of Thought” (1979)

(bit.ly/Iverson-NotationAsToolOfThought)

BLUB PARADOX



Some programming languages are more powerful than others.

Paul Graham, "Beating the Averages" (2003)

(bit.ly/blub-paradox)

BLUB PARADOX

“Some programming languages are more powerful than others.”

Weak
language

Blub (average)



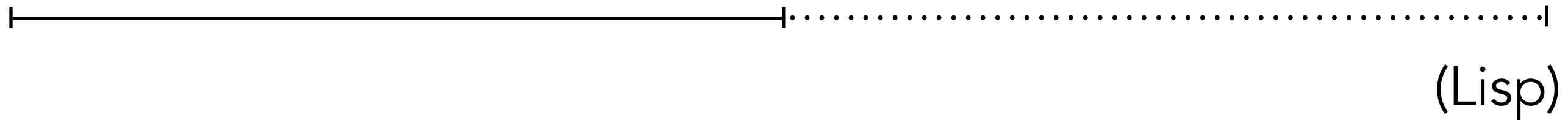
BLUB PARADOX

“Some programming languages are more powerful than others.”

Weak
language

Blub (average)

Super strong
language!



BLUB PARADOX

“I look at [Python, Java, C, and Perl].
How can you get anything done in
them, I think, without macros?”

Paul Graham, “Beating the Averages” (2003)

(bit.ly/blub-paradox)

BLUB PARADOX

“They're satisfied with whatever language they happen to use, because it dictates the way they think about programs.”

Paul Graham, “Beating the Averages” (2003)

(bit.ly/blub-paradox)

BLUB PARADOX

"I know this from my own experience, as a high school kid writing programs in Basic. That language didn't even support recursion... but I didn't miss it at the time. I thought in Basic."

Paul Graham, "Beating the Averages" (2003)

(bit.ly/blub-paradox)

SCARRED FOR LIFE?

“It is practically impossible to teach good programming to students that have had a prior exposure to BASIC: as potential programmers they are **mentally mutilated beyond hope of regeneration.**”

-Edsger Dijkstra, “How do we tell truths that might hurt” (1975)

(<http://bit.ly/dijkstra-truths>)

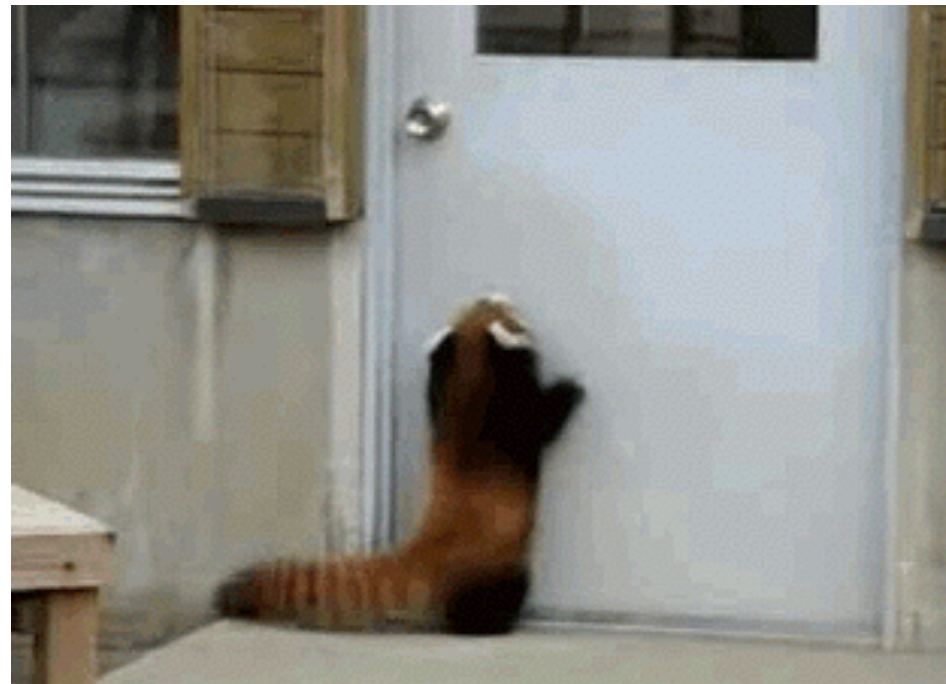
MENTALLY MUTILATED



BEYOND HOPE?!?!11/?

memegenerator.net

We are influenced by the constructs and idioms of the most powerful programming language we know, not the languages themselves, or the language we are using at the time.



(<http://bit.ly/cutest-red-panda>)

1. We can learn more (powerful) programming languages and how to program in them idiomatically.

HUMANS CAN LEARN.

iteration

HUMANS CAN LEARN.

iteration

list comprehension

HUMANS CAN LEARN.

iteration

list comprehension

map

2. We can implement the constructs of more powerful languages in whatever language we use.

CODE CAN MAKE THINGS.

“We should now think of a language design for being a pattern for language designs, a tool for making more tools of the same kind.”

*Guy Steele, “Growing a Language”
(ACM OOPSLA 1998)*

CODE CAN MAKE THINGS.

```
_.map(array, function(el) {  
    console.log(el);  
})
```

```
array.map(function(el) {  
    console.log(el);  
})
```

CODE CAN MAKE THINGS.

“Sweet.js brings the hygienic macros of languages like Scheme and Rust to JavaScript. Macros allow you to...craft the language you’ve always wanted.”

The screenshot shows the GitHub repository page for `mozilla / sweet.js`. The repository is public and has 131 watchers, 2,141 stars, and 116 forks. It features 1,102 commits, 8 branches, 17 releases, and 23 contributors. The main content area displays a merge pull request #316 from `natefaubion/macroclass-where` by user `disnet`, authored 4 days ago. The latest commit is `bc28a4244b`. The repository description is "Sweeten your JavaScript. <http://sweetjs.org>". The right sidebar contains links to Code, Issues (45), Pull Requests (4), Wiki, and Pulse.

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CODE CAN MAKE THINGS.

The future can be now
(kinda).

3. Programming languages are synthetic and can change.

SYNTHETIC LANGUAGES CAN BE CHANGED

iteration

map

SYNTHETIC LANGUAGES CAN BE CHANGED

iteration

map

array comprehension

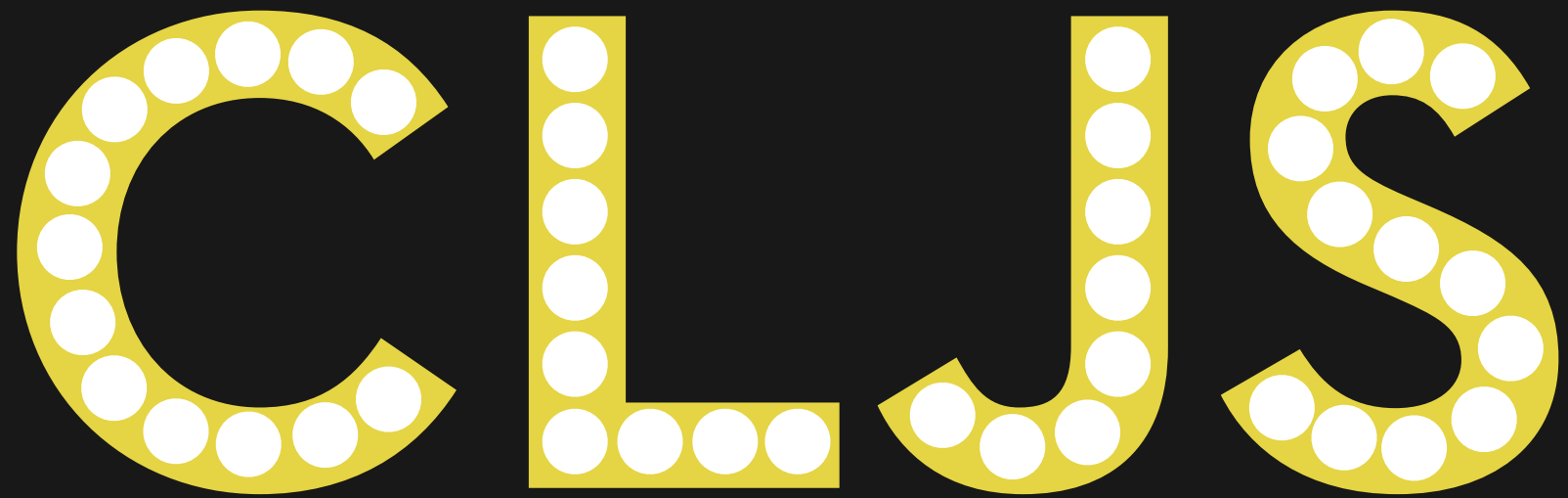
generators

SYNTHETIC LANGUAGES CAN BE CHANGED

Languages that can't easily
grow will die

Guy Steele, "Growing a Language"
(ACM OOPSLA 1998)

CLJS

The image shows the letters 'CLJS' in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font. Each letter is filled with a pattern of white dots, giving it a marquee or neon sign appearance. The letters are set against a solid black rectangular background.

or

Learn new languages, find cool
things, bring them back, and share!

Slides: jenna.is/empirejs-2015.pdf

Blog Post: bit.ly/ling-rel-prog



Thanks!



↑
Me