

Your Problem with Toki

Pona is Solved with One

Word: Nimisin



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Many, many, many times over, I've read the exact same argument as to why the constructed language *toki pona* is ideologically harmful or dangerous or at the very least

insubstantial. They claim it is because of one specific thing that critics keep coming back to — something that is contradicted by simply looking at the language practices of the Toki Pona using community in reality rather than in apocalyptic theory.

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[Redacted username]

20d

the toki pona community explicitly discourages trying to make toki pona denaskuloj because they consider it child abuse via language deprivation.

hmm, maybe this has something to do with the fact that toki pona is unsuitable to communicate the sum of human knowledge, but they don't seem to think so



1



[Redacted username]

20d

sona.pona.la/wiki/Nineteen...

- Newspeak would only be practical as the speaker's only language; through their other languages, a polyglot would know concepts that Newspeak intends to destroy. Toki Pona is meant as a temporary reprieve from other languages. The community specifically **does not support** raising a child as a Toki Pona monolingual, considering this [language deprivation](#), mainly because not being able to use Toki Pona with most people would cause the child to miss the [critical period to acquire language faculty](#).



2



Figure 1: Critic A

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[Redacted username]

18h

like

the 8est faith reading of this i can think of is "wow the cre8or of toki pona *really* doesnt understand the way language can affect perception"

8ecause it *does* affect perception



[Redacted username]

18h

if you literally dont have the words to express something you think or feel then you might 8e convinced its not there or its not real

and the use of language to alter *other* peoples perception is

actually half the 8ack8one of advertising



[Redacted username]

18h

when the language you speak is genuinely incapa8le of expressing certain concepts or talking a8out certain things then you

Figure 2: Critic B

These judgements were gathered from the Toki Pona Bluesky community. Furthermore, although I was not able to track it down again, I also saw a Redditor who had launched an open complaint, apparently, about the lack of necessary words like “six” and “seven” as well as the presence of unnecessary elements like nonbinary and trans people.

Overall, these arguments, as far as I can tell, are being made by people who seem to consider themselves users of Toki Pona.

Despite this, they seem to — possibly intentionally — observably disregard the books written by the originator of Toki Pona, Sonja Lang, whose idiolect of Toki Pona and whose interactions with the Toki Pona language seem to form the centres of normativity for the Toki Pona language community, also called Tokiponists.

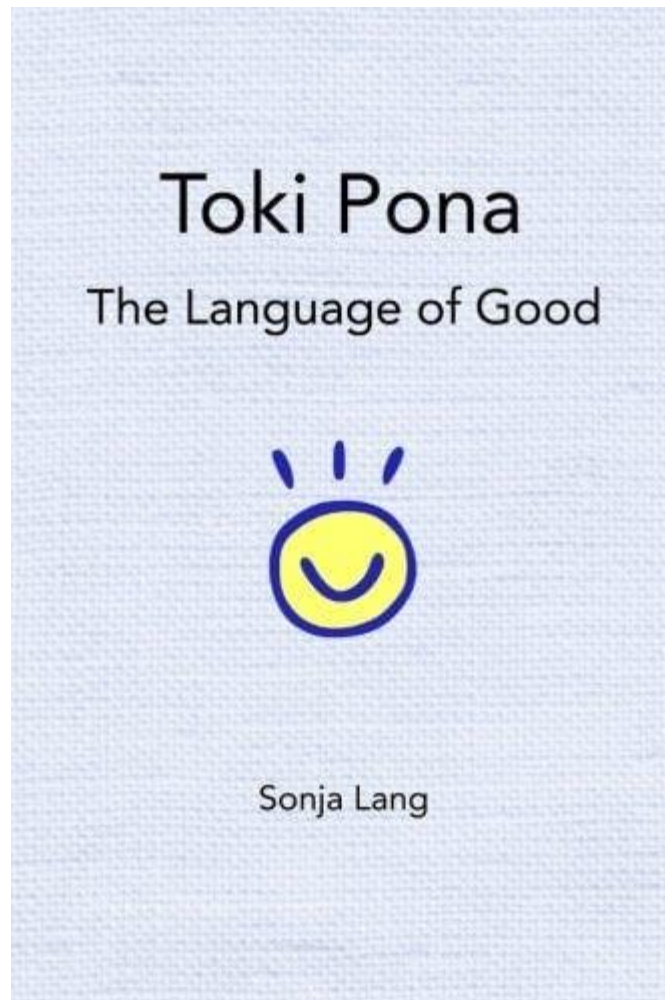


Figure 3: The cover of “Toki Pona: The Language of Good” (Lang, 2014)

I bring this up for two reasons: (1) to highlight that Toki Pona, as a language, is not a project created by one person, but added to, changed, and adjusted by its many users across various platforms like Discord, Reddit, and Bluesky; and (2) to highlight how these critics choose to simultaneously act as language purists that pretend no other form of Toki Pona is valid except for what is explicitly written in the *pu* and *ku* texts — the “canon”

— which defines the centre of normativity in contrast to the nebulous and communal linguistic reality of Toki Pona — a linguistic repertoire they themselves are also free to contribute to as they please but choose not to — while also actively disregarding the explicit foundational texts on which the centre of normativity they decry as morally bankrupt and linguistically limited is based upon. They reify an imagined ruleset that strictly polices the lexicon then they lambast the language on the grounds of their imagined ruleset which they've imposed upon themselves.

There are several issues found just in these two examples alone, but first, to focus on the problem they both imagine, I want to highlight the very premise of the second book of the Toki Pona canon, the *Toki Pona Dictionary* (2021, Lang). This second book expands on the dictionary section from the first book from 2014, one which is updated from a descriptivist as well as prescriptivist standpoint as opposed to the purely prescriptivist, Orwellian, high-control perspective that one might assume if one were to

judge Sonja Lang based on the character and intelligence attacks that have been levied towards her based on people's personal dislike of her constructed language.

Within the book, we find that not only has the lexicon of the language's core vocabulary seemingly changed, but so has the very conceptualisation of the language itself, such as in parts of speech. All of the features of the Toki Pona language described in the dictionary that are not the same as the first book were changed by the users of Toki Pona other than Lang, though some of them were originally invented by her, such as the word *oko*, which originally came about as a synonym within the Toki Pona user community for the existing word *lukin*, but as a result of people being people, the word *oko* underwent the natural linguistic process of semantic drift that occurs when people have the freedom to think and come to pragmatic conclusions for themselves. The words *lukin* and *oko* both mean "to look," "seeing," and "eye" as well as anything to do with sight and the eyes, meaning that under Toki Pona's pattern of simplification,

the two words would be substituted for each other rather than coexisting due to their redundancy, but because *lukin* is more associated with sight and *oko* with eyes and that is how they are used on a regular basis by the majority of people at the time of the dictionary's recording, they do coexist and the Toki Pona Dictionary describes them not as alternate forms of the same word, like *ali* and *ale*, but as different words with a significant enough user base to be *nimi ku sul*i, meaning “major words of the Toki Pona Dictionary” in the Toki Pona language.

TOKI PONA

DICTIONARY

Compiled by
Sonja Lang



Figure 4: The cover of “Toki Pona Dictionary” (Lang, 2021)

Another word that highlights the free formation of the Toki Pona language is the *nimisin n*. Before we define a *nimisin*, let’s define and analyse *n*. *N* is a word which technically defies the phonotactics of Toki Pona described in the original *Toki Pona: Language of Good* (Lang, 2014) book, which states that words in Toki Pona should follow a (C)V(N) initial syllable structure and CV(N) subsequent syllable structure. That means that every syllable at the beginning of a word must contain a vowel and may contain a consonant before the vowel and a voiced alveolar nasal consonant or native equivalent that is distinct enough to form a minimal pair with every other consonant; then every syllable after the first syllable must contain a consonant followed by a vowel and then an optional voiced alveolar nasal consonant or equivalent. Furthermore, because another aspect of Toki Pona defined in the 2014 book is that words are spelled as they are pronounced, the same consonant isn’t placed next to each other based on the norms of this first standardised version of the language.

According to the described rules of the initial form of the Toki Pona language, the word *n* shouldn't be able to exist under a prescriptivist system since consonants would not be allowed to stand on their own, and yet, this one does. The popularity of the word *n* prompted it to be described as one of the *nimi ku suli* in the 2021 dictionary. This word, which because it postdates the first book, is *nimisin* — *nimisin* being a contraction of *nimi* and *sin*, which themselves translate to “new word(s)” when put together and itself a *nimisin* — and was therefore, not prescribed by any higher up of the Tokiponist community to use the “language to alter *other* peoples [sic] perception” as accused in figure 2, but rather, came about because someone's desire to express themselves was felt to be constricted by not just the existing lexicon, but the phonotactics themselves, a core feature of any language but especially Toki Pona due to its simplified nature, and so therefore was innovated upon beyond these presupposed features. That innovation was then accepted as useful by such a large number of Tokiponists — specifically a minimum of 40% of Tokiponists, which was determined by the

results of several *ma pona pi toki pona* surveys — to the point of being listed as a significant word for the Tokiponists of that one snapshot of time in an official document about the language.

N isn't even the only *nimisin*, *kalamARR* for example, also moves fast and breaks things, though it wasn't popular, as a joke word, it is valid for its purpose for its users. Then we have *linluwi* which means “network,” which is useful for us on the *internet*. Numbers beyond two, like *san* (3), *po* (4), and *kulu* (6) allow for more specific calculations if that is something that you personally want in your individual or close communal lect that have already been invented. The word *majuna*, which means “old,” is a word that didn't even reach *nimi ku suli* status and yet appeared in the first *su*, which are official Toki Pona texts published after the *Toki Pona Dictionary* (Lang, 2021) by Sonja Lang, showing that anybody — including the originator of the language — can add or subtract from the language as they so please and still be valid in their usage of Toki Pona.

Putting aside that the semantic potential of each word in Toki Pona is so vast that in theory, you probably could express anything with the vocabulary already popularised, there is literally no rule against using an expanded vocabulary to express thoughts that you wish to have more nuanced conversations on than what you feel you can already do. The pretend limitation of Toki Pona that these criticisms cite to prove the dangers of this constructed language in theory simply do not hold water when looking at the reality of the language in practice, solely by looking at the existence of *nimisin* if none of the other proofs apply.

To be clear, the “one problem” referenced in the title of this essay is the pre-supposed limited and erroneously-alleged controlled word stock.

There are other things which people who look to criticise Toki Pona try to turn to, within and beyond the figures 1 and 2, though I will address them first.

Figure 1 claims that “toki pona is unsuitable to communicate the sum of human knowledge” and is so self-assured in this assertion that they even go so far as to call their opinion a “fact.” The issue with their claim is laid bare, however, when you are literate enough to understand the context in which it is being said. Critic A is making the claim that Toki Pona is unsuitable to serve as a child’s first language because of the language’s accused inability to communicate the sum of human knowledge. Aside from the aforementioned solution to this non-issue in *nimisin* and individual creativity, their own source states, “[t]he community specifically **does not support** raising a child as a Toki Pona monolingual, considering this language deprivation, mainly because not being able to use Toki Pona with most people would cause the child to miss the critical period to acquire language faculty.” Even the source which Critic A uses explains fairly clearly the problem with their point, almost as though Critic A could not bother to read even but a paragraph before trying to shove their point forward. To make it even more concise then: the number of people to talk to is small, so the child can’t

socialise. That quite literally has nothing to do with the language's pragmatic or semantic capacity, but rather, the language's domains of use and the sociocultural context which the language exists in. To clarify, "language faculty" refers to: the ability to discern and reproduce sounds or gestures; the ability to form words from those sounds or gestures; the ability to construct grammatically consistent sentences; the ability to decode meaning; and the ability to understand social contexts and apply the aforementioned skills accordingly. Though when the theory of language faculty was first proposed, it was assumed to be innate to human biology, now it is thought to be learned spontaneously from social interaction or at the very least be a combination of the two.

Toki Pona is a reprieve from more complex thoughts but not because of restrictions inherent to the words and syntax themselves, but rather because of the choices made by its users and the cultural norms and dissonance that using a conlang made specifically for simplicity provides.

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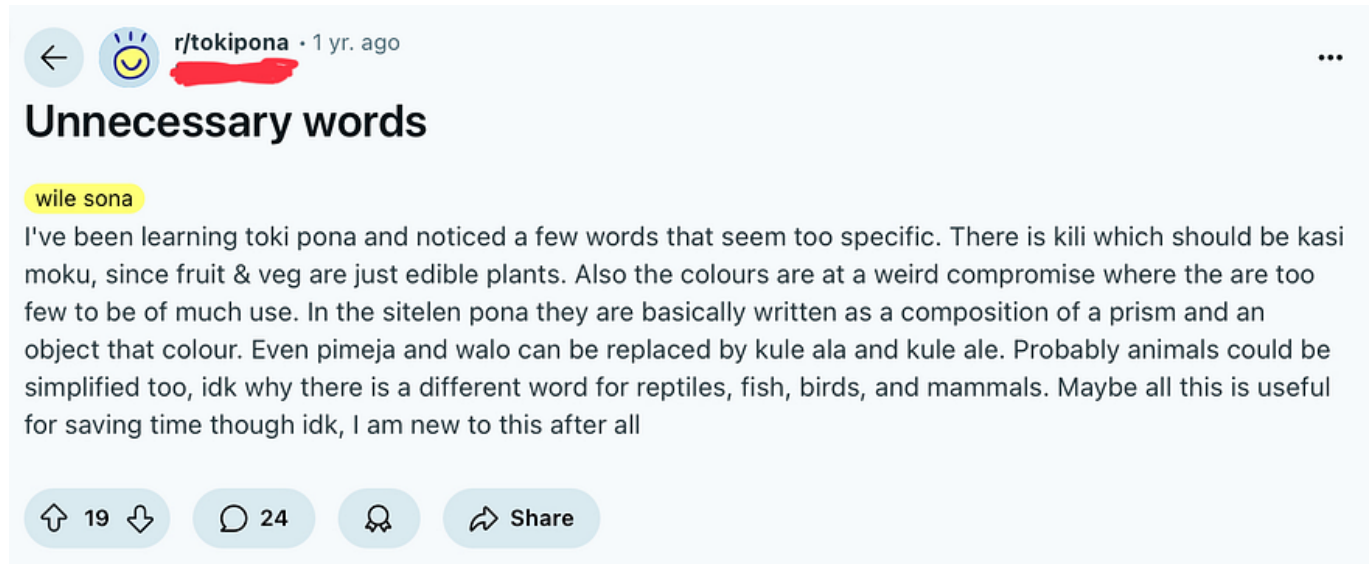


Figure 5: Critic C

Critic C asks a common question which I have also seen many times over, which is why Toki Pona isn't as minimal as possible, which I find intriguing because it shows the opposite end of the spectrum when it comes to language ideologies about Toki Pona. Whilst the previous criticisms were based on the idea that there wasn't enough freedom in Toki Pona, this criticism argues that there is too much — that there are too many options on how to express yourself.

By contrast to the previous concerns raised about Toki Pona by Critics A and B, Critic C feels that Toki Pona fails somehow at the

feature which Toki Pona was likely marketed to them on. In reality, however, people who are aiming for minimalism in their simplicity are free to avoid words that they don't want to use. Just like the reductive essentialists, the minimalist is free to use Toki Pona however they desire even if other people aren't, because they are an individual.

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1.1 Introduction

Sonja Lang created the language Toki Pona in the year 2001. Her aim was minimalism. Toki Pona consists of only about 120 words, which are not altered. In accordance with the position in the sentence, the words can vary their significance. To describe more detail you have to combine words.

It is not the goal of Toki Pona to describe complex issues. Dissertations and scientific papers will never be written in Toki Pona. Lawyers, bureaucrats, theologians and politicians are warned of the side-effect of this language.

Figure 6: Section 1.1 of "Toki Pona: The Simplest Language in the World Grammar and Vocabulary Lessons" (Warnke, 2020, p. 8)

I also want to tackle some non-critical but still negative things perpetuated about Toki Pona, such as the sentiment expressed in figure 6 which decides for others, indeed, with an authoritative tone drawn from and justified by an intra-communal scholarly genealogy going back over a decade. Robert Warnke asserts in

his instruction book what will and won't be written, seemingly discrediting the works linked to in figure 7. In actuality, although I did spend most of this essay expounding the individual liberties available within the Tokiponist community and within the framework of Toki Pona as a constructed language, no group of people are a monolith and of course, there won't just be critics who are reductive essentialists, but legitimately problematic people to whom the reductionists can reduce to, in this case, someone who prescribes what is and isn't appropriate for people to do in their personal lives with their hobby or passion.

Regardless, the proof against the notion that highly complex subjects have not, cannot, and will not be covered in Toki Pona is simply below. I have to imagine people like this are part of the problem where people believe Toki Pona is less free than it is.

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Technical language

Misconception: "Toki Pona is incomplete or only works for basic things. It's not used for technical communication or serious work."

Reassurance: Despite its minimalism, **Toki Pona is already a complete language!** People who aren't fluent naturally wonder if or how it can handle specialized topics. You'll be relieved and maybe surprised to hear that experienced Toki Pona speakers who know the subject matter can discuss anything with clarity and comfort, just like in any language. It's only a **skill issue**, and the language has plenty of ways that sound natural to those who use it every day.

Need proof? Listen to or read Toki Pona in action on various complex topics. These examples demonstrate how experienced speakers cover all sorts of technical fields:

- [non-Euclidean geometry](#), explained by jan Telakoman
- [a professional association for publishers and typographers](#), conducting international business in Toki Pona
- [investment strategy and retirement planning](#), explained by jan Tepo
- [paleontology and human evolution](#), explained by palisa jelo Natan
- [textual transmission and textual criticism in medieval manuscripts](#), presented by jan Lakuse
- [fats and food chemistry](#), written by lipamanka
- [language code standardization](#), discussed by jan Pensa and jan Tepo
- [Buddhism](#), discussed by kala Salan, jan Lakuse, and jan Tepo
- [a blood disorder](#), discussed by jan Luke and jan Kiwisin
- a growing digital and physical corpus of:
 - [texts and publications](#)
 - [videos, music, podcasts, and games](#)

Using a sentence: A common approach is to introduce a complex concept with a short sentence or phrase to explain it and set the groundwork. After that, it's easy to shorten it to just one or two words, and people will know you're still talking about the same thing or something related to it.

Don't memorize jargon. Know the meaning! If you don't actually understand a technical topic, then Toki Pona can prevent you from repeating empty jargon without thinking about the meaning first. See also [exploring global applications](#).

Figure 7: Technical language section under "Toki Pona FAQ: Clarifying Misconceptions"
(<https://tokipona.org/clarifying#technical>)

What is curious when looking at these contrasting belly-aches is, alongside misconceptions that are so common I could predict where they were going and had already thought about the non-issues long before these particular examples came across me — from understanding what a domain of use is to knowing having more doesn't mean you have to use more — their continued existence seems to come from, ironically considering Critic B, chronic illiberalism. In this case, I mean liberal as in in

possession of personal liberties rather than the normal political meaning of liberal, that is to say, a capitalist.

Both sides, from the more illiberal conservative stances that Critics A and B took towards Toki Pona in their language ideology that maintains a fundamentalist linguistic tradition, albeit perceiving that imagined tradition in the negative; to Critic C and Warnke whose stances about Toki Pona maintain an illiberal progression of Toki Pona towards a desired future derived from an enjoyment of a zealous idea of *pona*, “simplicity,” that is accomplished by people conforming to an even stricter set of grammatical, lexical, and phonetic norms.

If I were to prescribe a more general solution to a great number of these interconnected social problems, it would be a degree of self-respect combined with a dose of compromise on both ends of this invented issue. The ostensible insecurity towards potentially being different to the general Tokiponist community is apparent to me based on how all of these people, instead of

solving their issue by making use of their free will to just not do the things — be they the use of too few or too many words — that they do not want to do, they choose to outwardly push their preferences unto the surrounding people and projecting their personal differences in preferred personal expression and making it actually an issue with everyone around them not doing the thing(s) that they want to do, presumably so that they can do it. Conversely, though Toki Pona still maintains its use without interpersonal communication — I myself don't usually use Toki Pona for interacting with other people on a regular basis, but rather as a language for creative and reflective journaling — if one does desire to interact with other people, they need to understand that two people don't always, even if they are using the same language, speak the exact same way. Perhaps more effort is necessary to understand someone who speaks or writes differently to you, especially if it is you who is the one who is adrift from the centre of normativity, but one of the aspects of language faculty is the ability to interpret what is being said to you, and if you genuinely think that having a developed language

faculty is important, then being patient with someone trying to decode you as you also try to understand them is non-negotiable, whether we are talking about constructed languages or natural languages.

Conclusion, grow a spine and a heart. Also, if you want it, make it.

Toki Pona
Linguistics
Discourse
Conlang
Languages