

“tenpalken sennet”

A topic of my choice. Primarily, my purpose is to describe a hobby which illustrates who I am. I have attempted to make my personality apparent from the style as well as the content.

tenpalken sennet lettakas nuken nuptaspulke. I suspect you have no idea what this means. The thing is, neither do I – not yet, anyway. I do know that the first word sounds like “Jim Balkan,” the second like “senate,” and the fourth like “knowin’.” But these are chance resemblances to English. What you really see here is a work in progress, a conlang.

I heard your thoughts before your eyes passed over the last period: “What's a conlang?” If I were to tell you it's an abbreviation for “constructed language” before dispelling your preconceived notions, you would jump to conclusions. Oops, too late. You have me pegged now: I am the only serious speaker of Pig Latin; the Na'vi are my closest friends; and I will teach my kids Klingon. Wrong.

You wouldn't be wrong because Pig Latin isn't actually a language, because Na'vi was designed for a movie, or because Klingon sounds better when understood by no one else, though all of that is true. You'd be wrong because my motivations are something else – natural. But “natural” can mean much, so look: I don't conlang because it's popular. I don't conlang because it's profitable. I don't conlang because it's useful. I conlang because it's creative yet rigorous.

You might doubt how creative conlanging is. As popular misconception has it, a language is just a grab-bag of words, its speakers differ only in how far into the bag they can reach or whether they reach into the “correct” bag, and “linguistics” is a synonym for “etymology.” If all this is true, then conlanging ought to be easy and boring: Jumble up some letters, maybe add some apostrophes if you're feeling naughty, mash 'em together into forms like *scahaale* or *tpx'ast'y*, and define these codewords with one-to-one correspondences to English words: *scahaale*, n., winter. Yuck.

I never invent much of the lexicon, actually. I work in the more exciting realms: phonology, the realm of sounds and all their intricacies; morphology, the realm of word-shapes, of prefixes, suffixes, and infixes, of Spanish grammatical gender and evil Latin cases; and syntax, the realm of word order and all its intricacies.

There is much room to play around: What combinations of sounds are permitted? Are there clicks or ejective consonants? Can there be a verb suffix which indicates that the action of the verb occurs repeatedly within a short time? Does this suffix merge with other suffixes, and if so, which ones, or according to which rules? Are verbs distinct from nouns? Do subordinate clauses exist, and if so, what kinds of words can they attach to? Can word order indicate the speaker's attitude towards what (s)he is saying? How are questions formed? In speech, which elisions are made, which words clipped, which forms simplified? Is the structure of the language conducive to certain kinds of rhetoric, jokes, or ironies? In short, how does everything interact with everything else?

This is conlanging. Recall the sample I began with. It was *sprtlk*, a language I decided should have only six consonants (seven if you count the *r* appearing only in the name) and three vowels. I rigorously followed through the implications of my phonological whimsy, requiring many thoughtful hours and erasures on dry erase boards. Yes, even down to the reasons why *nuken* sounds like “knowin'.” Now I play freely with those other questions.

This is me. Easily misunderstood. Curious. Not entirely presentable, but partially so. Playful and rigorous at once. Hi.