

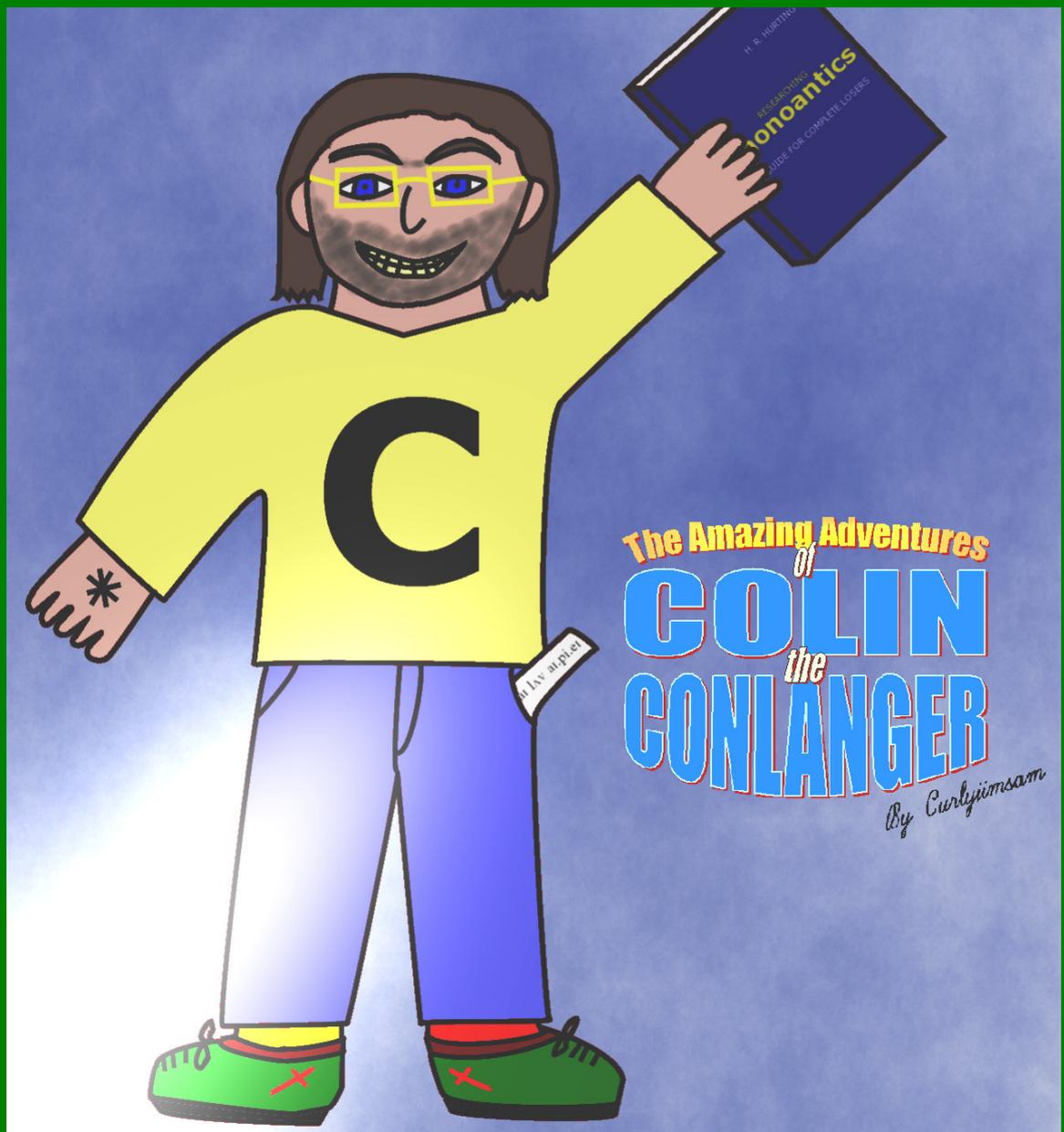
# conlang.com

## Journal

Issue 4

September/October 2006

Editor: Curlyjimsam



### ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

**Toki Pona:** featured language.

**ConCommentary:** new feature by Rik Roots.

**The Conlanger.com Journal**  
**Issue 4**  
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# The Editor writes ...



The first thing to do for this issue is to apologise for its lateness. Yes, it's out a long time after it was 'supposed' to be – even more of a delay than in previous months. Hopefully, though, it's better for it. There was one point at which I seriously considered giving up the project altogether due to lack of free time, but the skies cleared and I decided that, ultimately, the show must go on.

The second thing – which would have been the first, but for the circumstances – is to point out, as you may or may not have realised by now, that from this point forward the *Journal* will be a bimonthly, rather than a monthly, publication. The decision was made before the delays to this issue became apparent, though it certainly helped – a four-week late September/October issue of a bimonthly publication may be embarrassing, but certainly not as much as a monthly publication without a September issue at all. The basic reasons were relating to time and content. For one thing, I had been finding it virtually impossible to produce a complete twenty-odd-page issue in less than five or six weeks, due to other obligations. For another, I hoped that by giving people longer to make submissions, I might get more of them. Writing two-thirds of the *Journal* by myself is still a problem, and I would urge people once again to try and help if they can. Strangely, perhaps, most of the most recent interest in helping out has come from the ZBB, rather than the CBB, despite them having their own planned e-magazine in the form of the *KneeCap Journal*. I am very grateful for this: as a result, I already have a couple of articles for Issue 5, which should help a lot.

Last issue's experiment with a new font failed in several ways, and we have reverted to the former typeface for this edition. There are some other minor changes to the layout, however.

I'd like to thank Whimemsz for contributing a hopefully very useful article on sound changes (p. 11) and Rik Roots for allowing me to publish conlang-related extracts from his blog as a regular feature from now on (p. 9 in this edition). This issue's featured conlang is Sonja Elen Kisa's Toki Pona (p. 5). Finally, there's a piece on the importance of syntax by me (p. 15) and – our cover feature – the first part of my new serialised story *Colin the Conlanger* (p. 17). With any luck these will all provide an entertaining read.

Until November,

*(wily)jimsam*

# toki pona li toki pona

A review of the well-known minimalist language, by the Editor.



Ranking thirty-ninth in the 2005 Langmaker.com Top 200, Sonja Elen Kisa's **Toki Pona** ([www.tokipona.org](http://www.tokipona.org)) is relatively well-known conlang. I have always found it an interesting little language, and it is one of the only conlangs I have ever seriously considered learning – I am sorry to say that I failed in my attempt, though as no fault of the language itself.

Despite my own failures, Toki Pona has to be one of the most widely spoken languages constructed in recent years (it was first published online in 2001). According to Wikipedia, it has 'up to 30 fluent' speakers, plus 'several hundred with reasonable ability'. This is surely a considerable achievement for any conlang.

So, how has 'the good language' (as the name translates) come to be so popular? It is not a 120-year-old auxiliary language like Esperanto; it has not featured in best-selling novels like Tolkien's conlangs. The answer, as most members of the conlanging community probably know, is a simple one – it is a simple language. With just 118 words in its basic vocabulary, Toki Pona is far removed from most natural languages – but is also relatively easy to learn. It cannot be the first or the last language to attempt such a small lexicon, but as far as I am aware it is the most successful. Creating a fully functioning language with only a small number of roots is not as easy a task as it might be thought, as any conlanger who has ever experimented with this (and it is an experiment I would recommend, in order to help expand one's language-creation skills) will no doubt know.

Not having succeeded in learning the language myself, I am not sure how true the assertions of its supposedly 'simple' syntax actually are (the claim by Wikipedia that most of it can be written in less than twelve lines of code seems to have been written by someone who does not fully understand what the concept of syntax embraces): simply the fact that it seems to work is no proof of anything, as it is entirely possible speakers simply apply the rules used by their native languages where gaps exist, not realising there could be alternatives (see my article on pages 15-16). Looking through the lessons on [tokipona.esperanto-jeunes.org](http://tokipona.esperanto-jeunes.org), however, there seems to be an impressive level of detail in that which *is* covered – Toki Pona is far from a simplified version of English with a different set of words. Quotes like 'I've seen all sorts of weird mistakes occur when people try to learn this word' are always promising in this respect! ▶

Basically, I suppose, one of the things that appeals to me – and possibly others – about Toki Pona is that, despite its obvious irrationalism, in many ways it *does* seem like a natural language. Certainly some features of the ‘minimalism’ are reflected in many natlangs: the small number of number terms and the lack of true comparative constructions, for instance. But there are other features that don’t seem entirely necessary, that viewed objectively could simply be seen as complicating things unnecessarily. For example, the syllables *ti ji wo* and *wu* (pronounced as IPA) are not found, having ‘merged’ with *si i o u* in order to ease pronunciation, and *n* is realised as [m] rather than [n] before *p* (arguably, of course, the entire concept of minimalism is a complication).

These aren’t the only ways in which Toki Pona has elements of realism. Although the semantics of words necessarily cover a wider range of meanings than in English in several cases (to pick a word at random, *kule*, translated by the official dictionary as ‘colour, paint’, ‘colourful’, ‘to colour, to paint’), others have meanings that are more restricted: the Esperanto *Jeunes* lessons describe the word *olin* as follows:

*This word is used to mean love. However, it only refers to affectionate love, like loving people. For example, you might olin your girlfriend or your parents, but you don't olin baseball.*

Another way in which the language smacks of realism, fuelled no doubt by the fact that it is actually used by real people (for instance, on the Yahoo! group at [groups.yahoo.com/group/tokipona/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tokipona/)), is the way in which certain words have ‘evolved’ particular uses. The word *supa* is defined by the dictionary as ‘horizontal surface’, but – according to the lessons:

*While it can still be used this way, in actual use it has essentially come to mean either a table, a chair, or a sofa.*

Toki Pona vocabulary is mostly based off words from a number of other languages, admittedly with semantic changes, with a small number of words having onomatopœic origins and the odd *a priori* word. The origins of its words can be very interesting – *toki*, for instance, comes from English *talk* or Tok Pisin *tok*, and *pona* from Esperanto *bona* based off the Romance languages. More information on this topic is available at [www.tokipona.org/etym.html](http://www.tokipona.org/etym.html).

Toki Pona is designed not as an auxiliary language, nor as an artlang in the usual sense, but rather based on Daoist principles and designed to help shape its speakers’ thought processes, as predicted by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This is the basis of its minimalism and difference from natural languages. Although I myself failed in my attempt to learn it, I would highly recommend studying the language to other conlangers, especially those less experienced – it should be able to provide numerous insights into possibilities for our own constructions.

To quote the official website, *sin en ante li sin e lawa li pana e sona* (‘Novelty and change freshen the mind and bring insight’). Toki Pona is novel in many ways, and could indeed provide a bit of relief to stagnant minds. May it continue to inspire conlangers for years to come.

# Editor's Script Pick

*[This article has been removed by the Editor for copyright reasons, after unsuccessful attempts to gain permission for its subject matter's inclusion both before and after publication. The original article may be restored at a future point should a delayed response from the subject matter's creator be eventually received ~ February 2007.]*



# ConCommentary

Our new regular column by **Rik Roots**.

## Why is it important to conlang?

*Originally posted at [rikfiles.blogspot.com](http://rikfiles.blogspot.com) on July 12th, 2005.*

Today I shall evangelise about the Art of constructed languages – or for the anorak afficianados amongst us, *conlanging*.

Why? Because it's something we all do. Everybody conlangs. Every time a parent chatters away to their baby they're making up words, repeating nonsense sounds, singing to baby in a language peculiar to just themselves. Every time two people fall in love, they develop their own lexicon, their own shorthand ways of communicating between themselves – their very own private tongue. Groups of friends will play wordgames, coin neologisms, invent new rhymeslang. It's what helps bond people together, this ability to adapt the language to meet their particular needs. And it's what drives the language forward, evolving over time to renew itself afresh for each generation.

People need to communicate: it's genetic. If you don't believe me, then check out the development of the Nicaraguan sign language ([www.columbia.edu/~as1038/L02-sign-language.html](http://www.columbia.edu/~as1038/L02-sign-language.html)) during the 1980s. There's also been hints of a phenomenon called 'twin language', where twin siblings develop their very own language that they only use between themselves – and is soon lost when they enter the rough-and-tumble realities of school.

But what happens when a person takes this further? What happens when they devise a language so different from their own native tongue that nobody else in the world can understand it? Welcome to the wierd and terrible world of the conlanger.

The most famous conlanger at the moment must be J.R.R. Tolkien, who developed a mythology (originally for England) that included gods and elves, dwarves, wizards and heroes. He also gave these people their own languages, influenced by living languages such as Welsh and Finnish, but not derived from them. These languages were his very own creation. But he's not the only one – there's lots of conlangers out there, drawn like flies to the stench of the internet – check out [langmaker.com](http://langmaker.com) if you don't believe me.

Now, there's lots of reasons why people conlang. Some people are idealists who want to develop the perfect language that will solve the world's problems by getting people to talk to each other – though the reality is very different, as a quick browse of the auxlang mailing list archives ([listserv.brown.edu/archives/auxlang.html](http://listserv.brown.edu/archives/auxlang.html)) will demonstrate. Others are linguists and/or polyglots who are mad on linguistics to such an extent that they'll investigate everything to do about languages. Some are keen on science fiction, often writing it and using a conlang to add a little bit of colour to the story. And for others it's just something that has to be done.

I'm one of that last group of conlangers. For me, conlanging is an art: a way of expression; a means for investigating the world around me. ►

I started conlanging when I was around eleven or twelve, making simple ‘relexes’ (relexifications) of English, and by my mid-teens I was developing something new, something different from English both in the things it had words for and in the ways those words came together. It was (and to some extent remains) a very *private* passion, in that I don’t expect people to understand what I’m doing, or why, or even take much of an interest in my creation. This is *my art*, and I produce it to please me.

The Internet changed a lot of things for me. It kickstarted my re-engagement with poetry for a start. But it also gave me a place to keep my conlang ([www.rikweb.co.uk/kalieda/gevey](http://www.rikweb.co.uk/kalieda/gevey)), and everything that arose from its development such as the maps, the stories, the society that speaks my language. Through the miracle of webpages, I found a way of *displaying* my passion, and for others to access it. Now this was a very scary thing for me to do! I never talked about my conlang to anyone – not friends, certainly not family. They didn’t understand what I was doing, and I knew they didn’t understand. We had an understanding, if you like. But the website meant that I now had an audience for my work – an audience that sometimes had the audacity to ask difficult questions like ‘what?’, and ‘why?’ So (defensively) I said: *this is art*.

And over the years that lie has morphed into a truth. My conlang *is* art. I make it art through the way I display it on the site. The words I choose to use are an act of art. The morphology and syntax I deploy in my conlang are artistic statements: *this is the way I see the world through the prism of my conlang – is it not wonderful!?!.* The stories are artistic compositions, the teach yourself section – even in its unfinished state – is an interactive artistic installation. Even the commentaries are part of the foundations of my art.

So there you have it. My name is Rik Roots and I am a conlanger!  
*Haetu, ohsle ten! Geve telaa e.*

## Articles? Ideas?

The *Conlanger.com Journal* is willing to accept submissions on anything and everything related to constructed language or worlds.

**Information on your own or others’ creations**

**Advice on language or world construction**

**General linguistics articles**

**Practical activities – conworld-related recipes, model-making instructions etc.**

**‘Fun and Games’ – stories, comic strips, puzzles, etc.**

All of the above, and anything else you would like to see printed, can be submitted to the Editor for consideration. Email: [curlyjimsam@aol.com](mailto:curlyjimsam@aol.com).

# Designing Sound Changes

By Whimemsz

Anyone designing a family of conlangs (a confamily?) must eventually deal with sound changes. In fact, even people creating a single conlang might consider first designing an older version of that language and applying some sound changes to it, to introduce realistic and believable irregularities and quirks into the system. Many people, however, seem to be a bit unsure about which sound changes are “reasonable” and which are too far-fetched. I’ll do my best to help! Much of my data comes from Larry Trask’s *Historical Linguistics* (1996), Lyle Campbell’s *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (2004), and Terry Crowley’s *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics* (1998).

First, let’s look at some of the various categories of sound changes that are particularly common.

- **Assimilation** is the change of a sound to be more like a nearby sound. Assimilation can affect both sounds right next to each other (e.g. Latin *noctem*, “night” to Italian *notte*, with assimilation of the /k/ to the following /t/) or sounds apart from one another (PIE *\*penkwe*, “five” to Latin *quīnque*, with assimilation of /p/ to the /k<sup>w</sup>/ of the following syllable). Assimilation does not have to be total (PIE *\*swep-no*, “sleep” to Latin *somnus*, where the /p/ only partially assimilates to the following /n/, by acquiring the features of [+nasal] and [+voice]).
- The opposite of assimilation is **dissimilation** (e.g. Grassman’s Law, which affected both Greek and Sanskrit, deaspirating an aspirated plosive if there was another aspirate in the following syllable; for example earlier Sanskrit *\*bhōdha*, “bird” to Sanskrit *bōdha*).
- **Aphaeresis** (/ə'ferəsɪs/) is the loss of initial sounds (Old English *cniht*, “knight”, /knixt/ to ModE. /nait/).
- **Apocope** (/ə'pəkəpi/) is the loss of final vowels (*\*tohu*, “sugarcane” to *toh* in Southeast Ambrym of Vanuatu).
- **Prothesis** is the insertion of a sound at the beginning of a word (Latin *scola*, “school” to Spanish *escuela*).
- **Epenthesis** is the insertion of a sound within a word: **anaptyxis** is the insertion of a vowel to break up a consonant cluster (English *black* to Tok Pisin *bilak*), while **excrescence** is the insertion of a consonant, generally within a consonant cluster (OE *pymle*, “thimble” to ModE. /'θɪmbl/).
- **Syncope** (/ˈsɪŋkəpi/) is the loss of a word-internal vowel (British and American speakers both apply syncope to the word *laboratory*, but to different vowels: the final *o* for British speakers and the first *o* for American speakers).
- **Haplology** is the loss of a sound or sequence of sounds because it borders a similar or identical sequence (OE *ænglaland* to ModE. *England*, with loss of *-la-* because of its similarity to the neighboring

-lo-). If the word “haplology” haplogized, as people are fond of saying, it would become *haplogy*.

- **Metathesis** (/mə'tæθəsis/) is when two sounds within a word switch places (Latin *parabola*, “word” to Spanish *palabra*, with the *r* and *l* switching places). Metathesis is usually a sporadic change applying to very few words.

So, these are some of the changes that can add or remove sounds from a language. There are a number of more specific types of changes that are very common cross-linguistically. Often, they can be broadly classified as “lenition” (a weakening change, such as the voicing of voiceless plosives between vowels) or “fortition” (a strengthening change, such as the change in many Spanish dialects of /j/ to /ʒ/ or /dʒ/). Common examples of these types of changes include:

- **Compensatory Lengthening** is when the loss of a consonant prompts the preceding vowel to lengthen (Proto-Germanic *\*fimf*, “five” to OE *\*fff*, compare German *fünf*, *\*magl*, “prince” to Old Irish *ma:l*).
- **Gemination** is the lengthening of a consonant (Standard Finnish *osaa*, “s/he knows,” but dialectal Finnish *ossaa*). The opposite, **degemination**, is far more common (Latin *mittere*, “to put” to Spanish *meter*).
- **Voicing**, a voiceless consonant becoming voiced, is extremely common, particularly between vowels (Latin *lupum*, “wolf” to Spanish *lobo*). The opposite of voicing, **devoicing**, is particularly common word-finally (Kaqchikel Mayan *a:l*, “child”, [a:l̥]; Russian *drug*, “friend”, [druk]).
- **Nasalization** can affect both consonants (pre-Basque *\*zabanu*, “tablecloth” to Basque *zamau*) and vowels – the latter being more common, especially before syllable- or word-final nasals (Latin *bonum*, “good” to French *bon* /bɔ̃/).
- **Diphthongization** is the breaking of one vowel into a diphthong (OE *\*erpe*, “earth” to *eorpe*; Finnish *töö*, “work” to *työ* [tyø]). The opposite, **monophthongization**, is the collapse of a diphthong into a single vowel (Old French /aub/, “dawn” to modern *aube* /ob/).
- **Palatalization** is most common before front vowels, and generally affects dentals/alveolars and velars. However, palatalization can happen with no conditioning environment (*\*k > tʃ* was a common change which spread throughout the Pacific Northwest linguistic area).
- **Fricativization/Spirantization** is the change of a consonant to a fricative of some sort (Spanish *lobo*, an example given under “voicing” above, is pronounced [loβo] (actually with an approximant, [β]); Proto-Dravidian *\*tapu*, “to perish” to Kannada *tavu*, “to decrease”).
- **Unpacking/Segmentalization** is when the features of a single sound are separated to form multiple sounds (Bislama unpacks French nasal vowels in loanwords into the features [+nasal] and [+vowel], thus ending up with two separate sounds where French has one: *camion*, “truck” /kamiɔ̃/ to Bislama /kamion/).



- The opposite of segmentalization is **fusion**, where the features of two different sounds combine and create a single sound. The most common example of this type of change is the change of labiovelars to labials ( $k^w > p$ , etc.). If labiovelars are thought of as [+plosive +velar] followed by [+semivowel +labial], then the change can be seen as a combination of a feature from each of  $k$  and  $w$ , resulting in  $p$ , which has the features [+plosive] and [+labial].

But these lists of common types of change don't fully capture the way realistic sound changes work. As is well-known, the phonologies of languages tend to be relatively symmetrical. Consonants come in series (e.g., voiceless plosives, voiced plosives, fricatives, etc.), and vowels tend to fill up the vowel space in symmetrical patterns. Thus, what's missing from the explanation of sound change so far is the fact that sound change doesn't just affect random consonants and vowels in the phonology, but rather tends to affect all of the consonants in a series. Consider Grimm's Law, one of the most famous examples of a sound change, in which Germanic languages shifted the PIE voiceless stop series ( $*p, *t, *k, *k^w$ ) to voiceless fricatives ( $*f, *th, *h, *hw$ ), the PIE voiced stop series ( $*b, *d, *g, *g^w$ ) to voiceless stops ( $*p, *t, *k, *kw$ ), and the PIE voiced aspirate series ( $*b^h, *d^h, *g^h, *g^wh$ ) to voiced stops ( $*b, *d, *g, *gw$ ). These were not just isolated changes. Rather, it was an entire series of consonants which changed.

A similar type of change to shifts of whole series is **chain shifts**, where the shift of one sound causes the shift of another one. The two types of chain shifts are **pull chains** (where the change of a sound leaves a gap in the system that another sound changes in order to fill) and **push chains** (where a sound begins to change, thus becoming more like another sound in the phonology, which then shifts to avoid a merger). Grimm's Law, described above, was a chain shift. So was the Great Vowel Shift of English—more specifically, a pull chain. In the Great Vowel Shift, first /i:/ and /u:/ diphthongized to /əi/ and /əu/ (which later became /ai/ and /au/), leaving a gap in the vowel space which was filled when /e:/ and /o:/ shifted upwards to /i:/ and /u:/. This, however, created a new gap in the vowel space, which was filled by /ɛ:/ and /ɔ:/ shifting up to /e:/ (later /i:/) and /o:/. Finally, /a:/ shifted up to fill the space left by the shift of /ɛ:/ to /e:/ to /i:/, becoming /e:/.

I hope this has helped you in designing sound changes for your conlangs and confamilies. To conclude, I'll offer as an example the changes from Ryghělět, one of my conlangs, to one of its daughters, Réġledh.

- # = word boundary
- S = stop (plosive)
- [±vd] = voicing
- () = grouping
- V = vowel
- L = liquid (laterals and *l*)
- C = consonant
- [±diph] = diphthong
- ∅ = null (zero)



1. S > S[aspirated] /#\_
2. S > S[aspirated] /\_V[close]
3. S[-vd] > S[aspirated] /F[-vd]\_
4. S[+vd] > S[aspirated] /F[+vd]\_
5. (c,ʃ) > (ʃ,ʒ)
6. (c<sup>h</sup>,ʃ<sup>h</sup>) > (tʃ,dʒ)
7. λ > j
8. l > w
9. ŋ > in / (u,o,e,a)\_
10. ŋ > ŋ /\_(u,o,e,a)
11. ŋ > j /V\_V
12. ŋ > n
13. r > ʀ
14. (ç,j) > (x,ɣ) /\_u
15. (ç,j) > (ʃ,ʒ)
16. (b<sup>h</sup>,d<sup>h</sup>,g<sup>h</sup>) > (w,j,ɣ)
17. (a,e,i,y,u,o) > (ai,ei,ia,iu,ui,ou) / [+stress]
18. (i,e) > (ui,ai)
19. oi > ui
20. Vii > Vi
21. y > ø
22. ŋ > ʀ
23. (ʃ,ʒ) > (tʃ,dʒ) /#\_
24. m > Ø /V\_V (sporadic; blocked if V<sub>1</sub>=V<sub>2</sub>)
25. V > Ø /V\_L
26. (ʀC,Cʀ) > ɣ
27. nS > z
28. (aC,eC,iC,øC,uC,oC) > (ai,ei,ia,ou,ui,ai) / (C,#)\_C
29. (si,zi) > (ʃ,ʒ) /\_V
30. (s,ʃ,x) > (z,ʒ,ɣ) /\_#
31. Ø > ø /C\_C
32. i > j /#\_V, V\_V
33. u > w /#\_V, V\_V
34. (p,t,k) > (f,θ,x)
35. (p<sup>h</sup>,t<sup>h</sup>,k<sup>h</sup>) > (p,t,k)
36. ø > ε
37. i > Ø / (ʃ,ʒ,tʃ,dʒ)\_V
38. i > Ø /L\_V
39. V[-diph -stress] > Ø /F[-vd]\_(L,N,S[-vd])V
40. V[-diph -stress] > Ø /F[+vd]\_(L,N,S[+vd])V
41. e > ε
42. o > ɔ
43. (t,d) > (tʃ,dʒ) /\_iV
44. (ai,ei) > e
45. (ui,ou) > o
46. ia > ε
47. iu > ɔ
48. dʒ > ʒ
49. g > dʒ
50. θ > ð
51. ð > s /\_S[



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[www.conx.ws](http://www.conx.ws)

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*Your name*  
*The name of your work*  
*Genre (language, script or world)*

# The Neglected Craft

The Editor discusses the importance of syntax.

A conlang can work well without a ‘full’ phonology: a list of phonemes and a basic syllable structure is usually enough to convincingly translate a lengthy text. Inflectional morphology can reasonably be abandoned altogether. Syntax, however, is vital to any language – no matter how many case endings and agreement markers you choose to have, choose not to deal with it and creating something that really works, with anything you might wish to translate, is impossible. Unfortunately, it is covered in most conlangs in far from enough detail.

The primary reason for this, I suspect, is that many people just don’t realise what syntax really means. Asked to create a conlang, a person who is only familiar with the sounds of their own language will almost invariably produce one with a virtually identical phonology – it simply doesn’t occur to them that anything else could exist. A person who is only used to Indo-European morphologies will usually create languages with a similar sort of morphological system. And a person who hasn’t come across syntactic patterns beyond those of a few languages they are familiar with will make languages with what one might term ‘parroted syntax’.

This, in itself, isn’t a problem. The major online ‘how to make your own conlang’ guides tend to outline how much things vary in natural languages. At least, to an extent. Phonology usually gets the most detail. Morphology gets quite a lot. But whilst syntax usually gets a mention, there is also – usually – quite a bit left out. The prime reason for this, I suspect, is that there tends to be more of it. Phonology and morphology *can* be done reasonably quickly; syntax requires more work, and correspondingly there is rather more of it to describe. If I were to write 500 words on phonology, 500 words on morphology, and 500 words on syntax, I suspect the latter would be of least use. It needs more detail, but unfortunately, the online guides don’t tend to give it.

There are some things they do realise they have to do. The order of subject, object and verb. The order of noun and adjective, verb and adverb. Maybe even the order of nouns and adpositions, or nouns and determiners. There might be rules for the formation of questions or relative clauses. But good syntax needs to be a lot more than that.

Again, though, people don’t realise. There’s nothing wrong with having a conlang do something in the same way as your native language, but you should at least try to show you have considered the alternatives. If you assume all languages have a copular verb used similarly to English’s (or French’s or German’s, for that matter), you very likely will not bother covering your own language’s copula in the grammar. You simply haven’t realised that languages without a copula, or with a copula that isn’t a verb, or with a copula with obviously varying usage, exist at all. It hasn’t occurred to you that *Bob a man* very often means ‘Bob is a man’, or that a different word for *is* can be used in *Bob is a teacher*, *Bob is my father*, *Bob is angry* and *Bob is in the*

*building* (examples of proper inclusion, an equative clause, an attributive clause and a locative clause respectively).

It is because of cases like this that a constructed language can have an excellent phonology, an outstanding morphology, and yet beyond basic word order and a few simple sentence types have a syntax that is more-or-less identical to English – or, as I might say, *it because case-of like this that language-constructed phonology excellent and morphology outstanding can have, and yet beyond order basic word-of and a-few type simple sentence-of syntax that more-or-less identical English-to is is*. Looks great – to someone who isn't used to more varied languages. There is a lot more possible ways for that sentence to be formed than people might realise – and even if they don't want to take them, they should at least point out the rules that are the same as English rather than just leaving this as an unstated assumption. Even some of the most widely acclaimed conlangs are guilty of this.

Another reason I find lack of syntactic detail to be a shame is that I usually find it the most interesting part of a language. The types of adverbial clauses allowed or the words used to mean 'and' or 'or' in various different situations are to me a lot more interesting than a selection of cases or phonemes – but perhaps this is simply because I don't see so much of it. I don't know.

Morphology can never be a replacement for syntax, unless you want to go on some kind of crazy compounding rampage that is little more than syntax without word divisions. No matter how many cases or verb endings or whatever you have, and how detailed and original their usages might be, there's still a necessity for a bit of syntactic detail. Even if you have a 'free' word order – which orders are preferred, and when? Otherwise, chances are, when you come to translate things you're going to stick with your native language's word order a lot of the time, simply because it's easiest. It may not be grammatically incorrect, but it nevertheless lacks interest. And what about more complex word relations, like co-ordination (words like 'and', 'or', 'but'), comparatives and subordinate clauses? (Although complex morphological marking of a relative clause or similar would certainly be interesting – but the syntactic could not be abandoned altogether.) Morphology can achieve a lot – including things like interrogatives and imperatives that are usually shown syntactically – but it can't achieve everything.

Perhaps the most obvious bit of advice to give is: research. A few books on syntax, or even on some more 'exotic' languages ought to provide some enlightenment for anyone who's clueless about syntax outside their own language. *Describing Morphosyntax* has been recommended by one conlanger to another a thousand times before, but that only enhances its credibility – it has to be one of the most eye-opening books about syntactic (and indeed, morphological) possibilities for the ignorant around.

Alternatively, you can try to make stuff up off the top of your head. How could word relations be messed around and the basic meaning retained? This can be an enjoyable mental exercise – and who knows, you might even come up with something completely original.

So, next time you embark on a language sketch, try to concentrate initially more on syntax rather than the other areas, just for practice – perhaps outline enough phonology and morphology to get by at first and flesh them out later. And on your big projects: include as much syntax as possible.

# The Amazing Adventures of Colin the Conlanger

## Instalment I

By Curlyjimsam

*No offence or specific similarity to any real-life conlangers, living or dead, named Colin or otherwise, is intended.*

Colin the Conlanger got out of bed. He rubbed his arms and he scratched his head. He wondered what to do today. Could he make up some music or act in a play?

No, he decided, that just wasn't him. He wouldn't cook meals or go to the gym. He was a *conlanger*, and that's what he'd do. Nothing could stop him, not even the 'flu.

At this point the rhymes stop; they're not very good. You might want to leave now; I certainly would.

Colin scratched his head and rubbed his arms one more time. This had no discernable point, but it had become something of a habit. He pulled a comb through his straggly shoulder-length hair and dressed himself in the nearest T-shirt and jeans from the carefully organised heap of clothes on the floor next to his bed. His mind wasn't really on it; he was too busy musing on the possibility of ditching the current Gobchuk verbal system for something more interesting. The similarities to North Tabassaran were really too much – it had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now he wasn't so sure. On the other hand, changing the system would really mess up the texts in the language, and there were more than a few of them.

Putting the thought to the back of his mind, where it would undoubtedly get lost in the jumble of ideas that was his brain (only to resurface several days later at another highly inconvenient time), Colin put on his glasses and booted up his computer. The machine groaned into life. Colin blamed the manufacturers for its usually rather erratic behaviour. The fact that he himself had rebuilt parts of the machine several times in order to help make it work better was beside the point. He keyed in his password – no-one else ever came in the house, let alone the room, but all the same he didn't want to risk anyone stealing his valuable grammars or failed fantasy stories. Slowly but reasonably surely, his desktop – a map of the Humbib kingdoms covered in a mess of icons – came into view.

As he did every day – almost every waking hour, in fact – Colin logged onto the BBC (the Board for Bored Conlangers, one of the largest conlanging communities on the Internet). He cursed himself for wasting his time when he could be working on his latest project – a Dutch-based language called IJplaanke – but didn't do anything about it. In any case, the board was largely devoid of anything interesting, aside from some developments in the discussion of predicate nominals in Proto-Austronesian, which Colin had been following avidly for several weeks. Colin closed down his browser, flicked on

his CD player and rapidly became immersed in the obscure Mongolian pop music that it started to play.

Several minutes later, Colin realised he was doing absolutely nothing, reopened the forum, and checked for new posts. There weren't any. He briefly contributed to an assessment of a phoneme inventory and orthography – that uvular nasal seemed rather out of place, and was <č> for /w/ really such a good idea? – got bored, closed down the window again, and reached for his copy of *Researching Phonoantics* for a bit of light reading.

At this point the reader of this story may be strongly considering turning to an alternative piece of light reading themselves. 'Amazing Adventures', the title said, and all it's doing is blathering on about some guy, his computer, a CD player, a book and some languages with silly names. There's more to be amazed about in a three-hundred-foot hole inhabited solely by earthworms and microscopic bacteria, even if you find three-hundred-foot holes, earthworms and microscopic bacteria completely and utterly unamazing, even together. Please stop. Or preferably commit suicide by jumping off the top branches of a long-deceased banana plant. And please also cease writing as if you were the reader, which you clearly are not.

No! I will not bow to your requests! Trust me, Colin will have some very, very amazing adventures very, very shortly. So amazing, in fact, that you will be amazingly amazed. Prepare for the wonder of your life. Alternatively, don't, but don't blame me in the highly unlikely eventuality of your dying of surprise.

Colin scratched his head and rubbed his arms. His *arms*? Why his arms? He didn't know, and he didn't particularly care either. He stood up. He had a strange feeling that he was about to embark on some sort of amazing adventure. This seemed ridiculously unlikely, as the most amazing thing that had ever happened to him was spending two hours in a three-hundred-foot hole inhabited solely by earthworms and microscopic bacteria – by far his favourite lifeforms – and he'd had to pay a great deal for the privilege. At the moment he didn't have any money, having spent it all on a particularly interesting book about the intricacies of Russian nominal morphology.

After a short period, Colin decided that his initial expectations about something amazing happening were completely wrong. He sat back down in front of the computer. This was his first mistake.

As Colin's backside impacted the seat of the chair, it apparently decided that given the sudden and excess force placed upon it (Colin had not exercised properly for four weeks) meant that the current moment would be the perfect time to collapse, violently. Obviously this decision was only apparent, and not actual, because as anyone with the slightest inclination towards intelligence has hopefully realised, chairs only very rarely act of their own volition. In any case, the outcome was the same, and Colin found himself sprawled on the floor in front of his desk, his rear end in a great deal of pain that even his surplus fat could not block out entirely, surrounded by the wreck of his chair.

Struggling back to his feet, and rubbing not only his arms but also every area of his body that had been affected by the accident, Colin decided that perhaps staying at home today was not entirely as good idea (it had not occurred to him that his chances of having an amazing adventure would increase several dozen-fold once he left the house). He had a sneaking

suspicion that he may have broken his coccyx, and in any case a trip into town was necessitated by the obvious requirement to make new seating arrangements – there were no other stable chairs in the house, having all been destroyed by an army of woodworm and a stray beaver the previous summer. He could pop in to the doctor’s on the way home from the furniture store.

Colin then remembered that he didn’t have any money. It didn’t matter. He would simply forget going to the furniture store. There were plenty of spare rooms in the waiting room at the clinic – very comfortable ones to. It wasn’t entirely honest, but it did mean less of a walk.

Doing his best to put the pain to the back of his mind, rather than simply the back of his body, Colin went downstairs, pulled on a pair of shoes and a moth-eaten duffle coat, and left the house. This was his second mistake.

It was raining outside, not particularly hard, but enough to give Colin the unfortunate dilemma of removing his glasses and not being able to see (due to the fact that his eyesight had been somewhat damaged by spending most of his life staring at a computer screen) or keeping them on and not being able to see either (due to the fact that the lenses would become completely useless due to the film of water that had formed over them). In the end, he came to a compromise, bending the glasses into a shape that meant that only one eye was looking through a lense, something like a makeshift monocle. He didn’t notice the strange stares he was getting from people in the street. Nor did he notice the lamppost he walked into, at least not until it was too late.

As he lay on the floor, blood pulsating through his head, the rain stopped all of a sudden. Colin straightened his glasses. He became dimly aware of a man standing over him. This man had a pointed black beard and black glasses, and was wearing a long black coat.

Colin decided to it would be polite to say something. Unfortunately he couldn’t think of how to begin.

“*Obanaku gomites hongola hongolab sutiwuti zang bang?*” said the man. Colin started. Unless he was very much mistaken, the man had just asked him “You OK?” in Gobchuk – Colin’s own conlang.

“*Aaa --- zupnik agnik rugnik tutnik,*” Colin replied hesitantly. *Er ... yes.*

“*Gosaltz,*” said another voice, translating roughly as “Well, get up then you stupid oaf before you get you clothes even dirtier than they are already”. Bending his neck in a most painful way, Colin realised that as well as the man in the black coat, another four people were also standing around him. Then he realised that one of them was actually nothing more the lamppost he had walked into. Not wanting to encourage the wrath of this motley crew any further, he obeyed, and got to his feet.

He decided to take this opportunity to look closer at the people around him. They were, indeed, motley. Aside from the black-coated man, there was a woman apparently wearing nothing but a lime-green dressing gown, a thin youth in a brightly coloured shirt and a massive ginger person of indeterminate sex. They certainly didn’t resemble any of the fictional speakers of Gobchuk, who were supposed to be mostly cavemen with a strange affinity with certain species of fire-breathing dragons and an unusually advanced grasp of magic. Colin seriously wondered if he was dreaming. If this was the

case, it was the strangest dream he had had since the one with the rabbits and the radioactive raspberries.

“Who are you?” he asked slowly, forgetting that the conversation up till now had been conducted entirely in Gobchuk. The party around him seemed not to mind. The black-coated man switched seamlessly to English as well, and he didn’t have a trace of an accent.

“We’re the LangGang,” he said simply.

“The – who?” Colin replied.

“No, that’s a band,” said the man. “The LangGang. We travel the world and associated conworlds fighting language abuse and generally making everywhere a better place.”

Colin nodded. “When you say – language abuse – you don’t mean – you’re *prescriptivists*?” He said the last word in barely a whisper, as if it was a great terror of which he hardly dared speak. The LangGang let out a collective shudder.

“Associated constructed deities no,” said the man in the black coat. “That of which you speak is one of our greatest enemies. After nooblangs, Anglocloves and Christopher Paolini, that is.”

“So – I can speak – with my speech – broken up by as many dashes – (to show my nerves and general bad social skills) – as I like?” asked Colin.

“If you want,” said the man. “Now, the reason we’ve come to see you is that we need your help. I’m A, this is B,” (he pointed to the woman) “D,” (the youth in the coloured shirt) “and E” (the ginger person).

“What about C?” asked Colin, hoping he didn’t sound too stupid.

“That’s you,” explained A. “You know, C for Colin and all that. Although our research shows that 69.3% of conlangs prefer <k> to <c> in their romanised orthographies, so if you’d like ...”

“No, no, it’s fine,” said Colin, resigning himself to the fact that either this was a dream or a very weird but entirely real event that he wouldn’t understand however many questions he asked, or that there’d been something wrong with the mushrooms he’d had for tea last night. Strangely, no part of his body was hurting any more. “So – er – what d’you want me to do?”

“We want you to come with us,” said the ginger person – E – cryptically. His voice, at least, sounded very male.

“We have a problem,” explained A further. “Our sources detect an overuse of apostrophes in a conworld somewhere east of Winchester, England.”

Colin gulped. This sounded serious. “How do we get –?”

Before he could finish his sentence, there was a flash of greenish-yellow light and a noise like an exploding dolphin. Then – blackness, probably because Colin had closed his eyes. He wiped off the cetacean intestines that had somehow landed on his shirt.

“We have our methods,” said A, as Colin opened his eyes again.

They were standing in a small, musty office, but Colin hardly had time to register this before he realised that they were surrounded on all sides by a myriad of things like little tadpoles, swarming around and biting at them. Unable to help himself, Colin screamed.

*To be continued (hopefully) ...*