

Honors Creative Thesis Proposal

2022

Creating the Listener Language: a Constructed Language with Systematic Features of Rhythm and Tone

Project Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to create a language based on the language used by the Listener people in Brandon Sanderson's "The Stormlight Archive." What makes their language unique is the usage of rhythms and tones to convey meaning in a much more methodical yet complex manner than intonation generally does in currently known languages. I will create a complete language that reflects the culture of the speakers which will allow me to see the benefits and drawbacks of complex and systematic semantic intonation. This would fall under the category of a creative thesis project.

Project Importance

In the field of Linguistics, constructed languages are a way for researchers to find ways to make languages do things that current knowledge suggests they should not do. This would be similar to biology's use of knockout genes in researching what different genes do. By adding or removing certain traits within a constructed language, linguists can see the benefits and shortcomings of different facets of language. Within my work of the Listener language, I hope to obtain a better insight into the benefits and tradeoffs of having a rigorously set semantic intonation structure within a language. The rhythms within the Listener language greatly influence the semantic meaning of a phrase or sentence and often have their own semantic meaning. Though there is some understanding as to the semantic effects of intonation, recent

studies have been calling for further studying into “the semantic contribution of intonation” (Borràs-Comes and Prieto, 2018).

Project Overview

Constructed languages have become increasingly common over the last couple centuries. Some of the most well known constructed languages include Klingon, Esperanto, and Lojban. I am currently taking a linguistics class focused on constructed languages and the process of language construction. One categorization posits three types of constructed languages: artlang, engelang, and auxlang (Rhiemeier 2012). A constructed language can incorporate features of just one, or a combination of the three. Artlangs (artistic languages) in general are created for the purpose of entertainment and fiction, such as Dothraki and Klingon. Engelang (engineered languages) tend to be focused on experimenting with different aspects of language, such as trying to create a fully functional language with only 120 words. Auxlangs (auxiliary languages) are constructed with the focus of helping people communicate as a second language such as Esperanto which was meant to be an international language; Cants, coded forms of language for passing secrets, are also auxlangs. The Listener language as I plan to construct it would be largely artlang, as it is focused on fiction, and engelang, as I would be experimenting with semantic rhythms.

In Brandon Sanderson’s fantasy series “The Stormlight Archive” there is a people known as Listeners (Sanderson, 2010). At the time that the series begins, they had been living amongst themselves, isolated from the rest of the world for thousands of years. Their race, referred to by different names including Parshmen, Singers, and Voidbringers, has an affinity towards music. Their affinity for music is so intertwined in their language that whenever they speak, they use

specific formalized rhythms to assist in conveying meaning. Some example rhythms of the Listeners include, but are not limited to, the Rhythm of Satisfaction, Peace, Irritation, Reprimand, Curiosity, Resolve, Betrayal, The Terrors, The Lost, and many more. These rhythms have enough semantic meaning to them that simply humming to a specific rhythm can convey meaning, such as humming to the Rhythm of Betrayal conveys that you disagree with what was just said by someone else or even one's self.

Throughout the four books, Sanderson slowly gives more instances of the Listener language though they are still just written in English. There are some parts of the language which he has documented, such as the rhythm names, some of the elements of the rhythms (the Rhythm of the Lost was described in multiple instances as having a "soft beat, yet still violent with sharp separated notes). I found two instances where the actual Listener words were documented. The first is Narak, the name of one of their cities, which means exile, and the second was the phrase neshua kadal which means "knight radiant." There was also one idiom that I noted, though it was written in English, not in Listener, but the idiom was "say a name on the breeze and it will return" which is an equivalent to "speak of the devil and he shall appear."

Due to the methodical and consistent use of the Listener language in the books there is a significant foundation which I could use to start actual construction of the language. When I reached out to Sanderson to ask for any additional information that could be useful that I wouldn't find in the books, this was his response: "I am very utilitarian in my conlang usage--I basically only devise words when and if I need them, and don't generally have more than basic syntax and a few notes on proper sounds and inspirations. As long as he sticks to the Central Semitic language family for his inspirations, he'll be in good shape." Due to the methodical and

consistent use of the Listener language in the books and Sanderson's advice, there is a significant foundation which I could use to start actual construction of the language.

Languages have several trade offs, for example English has few grammatical cases which allows for simpler morphology, but that means that word order generally fills in the ambiguity gap, and restricts the flexible sentence structure that languages with many cases enjoy. These trade offs have, in many cases, been the reason why certain elements of language are very rare. Languages with a word order beginning with the object instead of the subject or verb are traditionally more difficult to understand, and thus more rare. By constructing languages, especially engelangs, linguists can better see the tradeoffs that occur with the target feature. By constructing a language with an expanded emphasis on intonation, I hope to better understand the effects of varied forms of intonation, and to understand why human languages don't have as expanded intonation as the Listener people.

Qualifications of Thesis Committee

Faculty Advisor: Dirk Elzinga is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at BYU who specializes in phonology and language documentation, primarily the Shoshone and Ute languages. He also teaches a capstone course on language construction, which I am currently taking.

Reader: Joseph W. Windsor is a knowledge translator in the Cumming School of Medicine (University of Calgary) with a background in literature, language studies, and linguistics. He is also President of the Language Creation Society, the leading international society for the furthering of language construction for academic and non-academic purposes.

Project Timeline

From May until August of 2022, I worked on noting all the information that I could find from the already written Stormlight Archive series. From September to December 2022 I plan to work primarily on the majority of the Listener language including vocabulary, grammar, semantics, phonology, morphology, and orthography. January of 2023 will be focused on finalizing and adding the rhythms and tones to the language and grammars; the Listener people would consider this to be adding the soul to the language. The final stage will be February when I will write the Honors Creative Thesis Write-up.

Funding

I do not plan on needing any funding to help with the completion of this creative project.

Conclusion

This creative project will provide an insight into the usage of intonations in language and the effects of extending the functions of intonation. With this project I will have a final document of 50-100 pages of information including, but not limited to, grammar, vocabulary, translations, morphology, phonology, orthography, and more. This project will allow further investigation into the limits, benefits, and drawbacks of highly systematic intonation and also the semantic role of intonation.

Works Cited

- Prieto, Pilar, and Joan Borràs-Comes. "Question Intonation Contours as Dynamic Epistemic Operators." *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2018, pp. 563–86.
- Rhiemeier, Joerg. 2012, Sept. "The Art of Conlang Classification." *Jörg Rhiemeier's Conlang Page*. <http://www.joerg-rhiemeier.de/Conlang/classification.html>
- Sanderson, Brandon (2010). *The Stormlight Archive*. New York City: Tor Books