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# In their own words -- literally

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Peter Tym / For the Times

Sonja Elen Kisa of Toronto created the simple language Toki Pona, consisting of only 120 words, to help clarify her thinking during a period of depression. She has received e-mails from people learning it all over the world.

**Step aside, Tolkien fans and grunting Klingonists: Newly invented tongues are creeping into the public domain, thanks to the Web.**

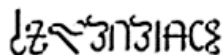
By Amber Dance, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
August 24, 2007

In any language, Sonja Elen Kisa was depressed.

The world was overwhelming, and the thoughts that swirled through her mind in French, English, German or Esperanto echoed that.



**Klingon culture**  
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**Epiq by David Peters**  
Pronunciation: ee-khoh-eh

GRAPHIC  
**From one language to many**  
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So Kisa, 28, a student and translator in Toronto, decided to create her own language, something simple that would help clarify her thinking. She called it Toki Pona -- "good language" -- and gave it just 120 words.

"Ale li pona," she told herself. "Everything will be OK."

Kisa eventually sorted through her thoughts and, to her great surprise, her little language took off, with more than 100 speakers today, singing Toki Pona songs, writing Toki Pona poems and chatting with Toki Pona words.

It's all part of a weirdly Babel-esque boom of new languages. Once the private arena of J.R.R. Tolkien, Esperanto speakers and grunting Klingon fanatics, invented languages have flourished on the Internet and begun creeping into the public domain.

The website Langmaker.com lists more than 1,000 language inventors and 1,902 made-up languages, from 'Ayvãrith to Zyem.

The language inventors have, of course, created a word to describe what they do -- "conlang," short for constructed languages.

The awareness of invented languages has been driven in part by their use in popular films, such as Ku, a fictional "African" language spoken by Nicole Kidman in the 2005 film "The Interpreter."



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Created languages may have no hope of supplanting the real thing, but for most conlangers, that is hardly the goal. Hobbyists like Kisa find it a fun or therapeutic practice. Linguists can use conlangs to dissect how real language works. For a select few who write fiction or work for Hollywood, conlanging can even be a moneymaker.

But to most linguaphiles, conlangs are simply art. Their palette holds not paints but the buzz of the letter "z," the hiss of an "s," the trill of an Italian "r."

And sometimes the howl of a Klingon scream: "*Hab SoSII' Quch!*"

"Your mother has a smooth forehead!"

In this realm of art, Toki Pona is white canvas with scattered brushstrokes of primary colors.

Kisa created Toki Pona as an exercise in minimalism, looking for the core vocabulary that is necessary to communicate.

With only 120 words, a Toki Pona speaker must combine words to express more complicated ideas. For example, the Toki Pona phrase for "friend" is *jan pona* (the "j" sounds like a "y"), literally "good person."

Kisa, who is studying speech language therapy, tried to focus Toki Pona's vocabulary on basic, positive concepts.

"It has sort of a Zen or Taoist nature to it," Kisa said.

Tolkien liked to call invented language his "secret vice." He spent hours at the solitary hobby, designing grammars and modifying words from Latin, Finnish, Welsh and others for his languages.

Eventually, his languages needed tongues to speak them, and those speakers needed a place to live. And thus Middle-earth was born, with Tolkien's languages becoming the Sindarin and Quenya of the elves, the Khuzdul of the dwarves, and the Black Speech of the orcs.

People have been inventing languages since at least the 12th century, when the nun Hildegard of Bingen developed a rudimentary conlang she called *Lingua Ignota*, Latin for "unknown language."

No one knows its purpose. All that survives is a short passage and a list of 1,012 terms arranged from the highest form, "God," to the lowest, "cricket."

None of the invented languages has had much sticking power except Esperanto, which was created in the late 19th century by Polish doctor Ludovic Zamenhof.

His dream was to give humanity a common international language that would be simple to learn. Esperanto's vocabulary is small, word order does not matter, and there are no irregular verbs.

"*Gi estas iom lingvo idealisma*," said William B. Harris, director of the central office of the Esperanto League for North America in California. "It's somewhat of an idealistic language."

Today, as many as 2 million people speak Esperanto, which conlangers call an "auxlang," or auxiliary language. Among them are about 1,000 native speakers, who learned the language as children.

Learning is the easy part. Actually creating a language is a task only for the very tenacious. It took Kisa a year to put hers together, and her language was built to be basic.

It is not enough to simply replace existing words with invented ones. To a conlanger, such a construction would be a mere code.

The conlanger considers many factors, starting with the sound of the language.

Linguists call it phonaesthetics; Germans call it *Sprachgefühl* -- "speech feeling."

Tricky to define, it's that certain quality that makes French the language of love, and German the language that "makes you want to conquer Poland," said John Quijada,



a Sacramento website developer and creator of Ithkuil, who attended an invented language conference at UC Berkeley this summer.

If the conlang is to be a language for nonhumans, the conlanger also must consider their biology -- if speakers lack teeth or vocal cords, the language's sounds will be constrained accordingly.

The conlanger must then ponder the grammar. For example, will the word order be subject-verb-object, as in English, or perhaps object-subject-verb, following the example of Yoda?

There are rules to this game. Human languages -- known as "natlangs," for natural languages -- follow universal linguistic patterns. For example, very few human languages use the raspberry sound, but all have an "ah" sound. To create a pseudo-natlang, the conlanger also should follow those rules.

Of course, there are instances when one doesn't want to follow the rules. In creating Klingon for "Star Trek," Marc Okrand, 59, said, "I looked at all those kinds of rules and then violated them on purpose."

He chose the rarest of grammatical structures, object-verb-subject. A Klingon would say, "The Enterprise boarded I." And Okrand purposely picked sounds that would never be found together in the same human language.

All this has added up to one alien manner of speech.

The challenge has not deterred serious Klingonists, who number perhaps a few hundred worldwide. Djörn X. Öqvist, 33, a Swedish linguistics student and founder of the Klingon Academy, said you must be creative with Klingon's 2,600 words.

For example, he said, there is no way to say "Park the car." No problem. Klingon speakers "dock" their vehicles.

The difference between "park" and "dock" illustrates how languages can talk about similar things but conjure subtly different images.

The phenomenon was noted by early 20th century linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They proposed a theory that language had the power to broaden or constrain a speaker's thoughts. That is, it is hard to think about concepts without the specific words to express them.

For Sarah Higley, 50, an English professor at the University of Rochester, the language she created when she was 10 had the power to conjure a private universe.

She created a language she called Teonaht (TAY-oh-noth) for a race of winged felines, in a universe that was uniquely her own. Teonaht gave her words for her own personal feelings, the thoughts that no one else could ever fully appreciate. "It was a way to access a spiritual world that I didn't want to share with anybody," she said.

In 1955, sociologist James Cooke Brown came up with an idea to test the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. He would train students in a new language and look at how their thinking changed.

He knew he could not use a natlang -- it would be impossible to separate language from the influence of culture. One cannot learn French without, at some level, thinking about crêpes and ratatouille.

So Brown invented a cultureless language, Loglan -- short for "logical language."

Just as scientists use mice as a model for the human body, Loglan would be a model language for his laboratory of thought.

Brown borrowed vocabulary from English, French, German, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, Russian and Japanese -- the eight most widely spoken languages at the time.

Loglan was designed to be free of irregularity and ambiguity. The Loglan lexicon, containing more than 10,000 words, is made up of five-letter root words and one- or two-letter modifiers. The roots can be combined to make new words.

He included words for the mathematical Boolean variables such as "and," "or inclusive" and "or exclusive" to encourage clear, logical thinking.

As it turned out, creating the language wasn't the hardest part. Like many successful conlangers, Brown struggled to maintain control over his creation.

He founded the Loglan Institute in San Diego in the 1970s to bring others into the project, but then was upset when they didn't agree with his ideas.

"In 1984 there was a knock-down, drag-out battle over this," said Bob LeChevalier, 53, who was a member at the time. The institute fell apart, and Brown was never able to conduct his great experiment.

LeChevalier and others developed Lojban, a language built on principles identical to Loglan's. LeChevalier estimates there are 500 to 1,000 Lojban speakers.

Kisa too has wrestled with the growing pains of her creation.

Once a language is released from the notebooks and index cards of its birth, other speakers may use it for purposes its creator never intended.

Since Kisa let Toki Pona loose on the Internet in 2001, it has spread from Toronto to speakers all over the world.

She has received e-mails from Russians learning Toki Pona and a Finnish therapist who wants to teach it to his depressed patients. MIT routinely offers a seminar about the language.

Occasionally they offer criticism as well as praise. Some want to express complicated thoughts in Toki Pona, running counter to its design.

She has given in to a few complaints. It's only natural for language to evolve, she said.

"*Tenpo ni la toki pona li kama suli. Jan mute li kepeken e ona,*" she said. "It's like a living thing now."

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