

Build Your Own Language

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Just a few snippets of a fictional language can add a lot of depth to a story. However, for someone with no experience in linguistics, it can be a daunting task to create something that is plausible and isn't just a code superimposed upon English grammar. This document provides a step-by-step method for constructing a fictional language.

General Note

Many of these steps call for the algorithmic generation of words. While this can be done by hand, it's a lot easier to do with a computer - even if it's only a spreadsheet program. It is a very good idea to keep track of created words in a "dictionary" in order to avoid unintentional duplication.

1. Phonemes - Choose the phonemes ("the smallest segmental unit of sound employed to form meaningful contrasts between utterances") that your language will use. A phoneme is a set of one or more phones (sounds). For example, in English the phoneme /th/ includes the phones [θ] and [ð]. See APPENDIX A at the end of this document for help with pronouncing IPA symbols.

Example: p b t d k g f v s z sh h ch l m n r i u e o a

2. Build Character Tables - Write down six lists of phonemes: Initial Consonants (C1), Initial Vowels (V1), Middle Consonants (C2), Middle Vowels (V2), Final Consonants (C3), and Final Vowels (V3). If desired, include phoneme clusters, such as "kl", "nd" or "sp".

Example:

C1	p b t th d k kl g f v s z sh h ch l m n r
V1	i u e o a
C2	p b t d dg k ks kl g gs f v s z sh h l m n r
V2	i u e o a ae ai
C3	p b t d k g f v s z sh h ch l m n r
V3	i u o a

3. Build Morphology Table - Write down a list of schemes that indicate the shape of the words allowed.

Example: C1V3, V1C3, C1V2C3, V1C2V3, C1V2C2V3, V1C2V2C3

An alternative method for selecting the phonemes and building the character and morphology tables based upon a sample of text is provided in APPENDIX C at the end of this document.

4. Generate Test Words - Randomly select a scheme from the morphology table, and fill in values selected randomly from the corresponding character tables. Repeat as necessary, adjusting your chosen phonemes, character tables, and morphology table as desired.

Example: C1V2C2V3 becomes “kloba”

5. Choose a Word Order - Decide on the order that subject (S), verb (V) and object (O) appear in sentences. There are six possible orderings: VSO, SVO, SOV, VOS, OVS, and OSV. English generally uses SVO. Most natural languages fall into the first three. The last one (Yoda: “Take you to him I will.”) is very rare.

Example: VSO - “Drove John the car.”

6. Choose the Branching Direction - Decide whether Adjectives will precede or follow the nouns they modify (AN or NA), and whether Adverbs will precede or follow the verbs they modify (AV or VA).

Example: NA, VA - “Drove dangerously John the car red.”

7. Determine Sentence Syntax - Build the basic syntax for the language using the formulas given in APPENDIX B at the end of this document. This step isn’t really necessary, but following the formulas will help you build consistent sentences.

Example:

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sentence ::= verb_phrase {subject_phrase} {object_phrase}
subject_phrase ::= noun_instance {noun_modifier}
verb_phrase ::= VERB {verb_modifier}
noun_instance ::= NOUN | PRONOUN
verb_modifier ::= ADVERB | tense_marker | etc.
noun_modifier ::= ADJECTIVE | NUMBER | ARTICLE | etc.
object_phrase ::= subject_phrase| adjective_phrase | sentence
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8. Choose Pronouns - Select which pronouns you wish to use and fill them in with short words using the method described in step 4. Some possible pronouns are given in the table below.

Person	Singular	Plural
First	I	we
Second	you	you
Third (masculine)	he	they*
Third (feminine)	she	they*
Third (inanimate)	it	they*
Third (neuter)	one	they*

* Note that the number of pronouns can be reduced by grouping them together, or through regular grammar rules such as those for making nouns plural, possessive, or the object of a sentence (case).

Example:

1st person - ye

2nd person - te

3rd person - ke

All are made plural by adding the suffix “-n”, and no changes are made for case.

Neither gender or the role of the pronoun is distinguished, and all objects are treated as animate.

9. Decide on Verb Forms - Sentences may require verbs to be modified to show the *tense* (past, present, future), *aspect* (perfect/completed, imperfect/non-completed, habitual/regular, iterative/repeated), *mode* (indicative, subjunctive, imperative), or *agreement* (to match the subject of the sentence). Choose which of these will be included, and whether they are indicated through the use of prefixes, suffixes, or auxiliaries.

Tense

Present used when the action is occurring at the present time.

Past used when the action occurred in the past.

Future used when the action has not yet occurred.

Aspect

Habitual used to indicate a habit that has no point of completion.

Continuous used to indicate an action that is in a state of continuing.

Inceptive used to indicate the beginning stage of an action.

Mode

Indicative used to indicate that something is actually the case.

Conditional used to speak of an event whose realization is dependent upon a condition.

Optative used to express hopes, or wishes.

Imperative used for direct commands and requests.

Prohibitive used to indicate that the action of the verb is not permitted.

Interrogative used for asking questions.

Note that if prefixes or suffixes are desired, it might be useful to change the morphology and/or phonology of the verbs.

Example:

Tense and aspect will be indicated by auxiliaries. Mode and agreement are not included.

Past neb

Present (none)

Future shul

10. Generate the necessary prefixes, suffixes, or auxiliaries - Use the method described in step 4, ignoring any results that are too long.

11. Decide on Noun Forms - Sentences may require nouns to be modified to show the case (role) of the noun. Some of the possible cases (there are many more) are given below. Choose which of these will be included, and whether they are indicated through the use of prefixes, suffixes, or prepositions.

Nominative	used when the noun is the subject of a sentence. (“I fed the cow.”)
Ablative	used to denote movement away from the noun. (“It came <i>from</i> space”)
Accusative	used when the noun appears as the object of a sentence. (“I fed the <i>cow</i> .”)
Allative	used to denote movement towards the noun. (“The cow is coming <i>to</i> Indianapolis!”)
Dative	used to denote the noun to which something is given. (“I gave an apple <i>to</i> the cow.”)
Genitive	used when the noun is in possession of something. (“It was the farmer <i>'s</i> cow.”)
Locative	used to denote the location of the object. (“I fed the cow <i>at</i> the farm.”)
Instrumental	used to indicate that a noun is the instrument or means by or with which the subject achieves or accomplishes an action. (“I ran over the cow <i>with</i> the tractor.”)

Note that if prefixes or suffixes are desired, it might be useful to change the morphology and/or phonology of the nouns.

Example:

Noun case is indicated by prepositions.

12. Generate prefixes, suffixes, or prepositions - Use the method described in step 4, ignoring any results that are too long.

13. Generate special pronouns - There are a number of special pronouns in English. They are used for asking questions (who, what, where, when, how) and to indicate an object or objects (this, that, these, those). Decide which to include, if any, and create words for them using the method described in step 4.

14. Generate other miscellaneous articles - Many other small words appear in English that are used for a variety of purposes. Decide which to include, if any, and create words for them using the method described in step 4.

who, what, where, when, how
 this, that, these, those
 yes, no, please

15. Generate nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs - Use the method described in step 4, changing the character and morphology tables if desired based upon steps 9 (Decide on Verb Forms) and 11 (Decide on Noun Forms). If desired, the distinction between adjectives and adverbs may be ignored, grouping them into the catch-all of “modifiers”.

Some word lists have been included in APPENDIX D for examples. They are, of course, nowhere near comprehensive and some of the words may not fit in context with a given culture.

16. Extras - Color Terms

Different languages not only have different words for colors, but they often group them differently and may not make a distinction between colors that another language does. In general though, the color terms in a language develop in a consistent order. Human languages that have a term for a color on the following list will typically have terms for all the colors that precede it. If they don't have a term for one of these colors then that color would be referred to by the term for one of the colors that precede it. For example, some languages don't make a distinction between "blue" and "green".

black, white, red, blue, yellow, green, brown, orange, pink, purple, gray

17. Extras - Numbers

The numbering system a culture uses can have a strong impact on their language and way of thinking. While most human societies use base 10 numbering, a small number have used base 8, 12, 20 and even 60. Further, not all cultures have a concept of the number 0 - though it is very important for a technological society.

Resources

The BG Language Creation Guide

<http://www.fridaynightlinguistics.org/languagecreation/>

Color Terms

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_terms

Conlang Atlas of Language Structures

<http://cals.conlang.org/>

The CONLANG Mailing List

<http://listserv.brown.edu/archives/conlang.html>

A Conlanger's Thesaurus

<http://lingweenie.org/conlang/ConlangersThesaurus.pdf>

Fontstruct - Online Font Creator

<http://fontstruct.com/>

IPA Charts (with sound recordings!)

<http://www.yorku.ca/earmstro/ipa/>

Language Creation Society

<http://conlang.org/>

Ogden's Basic English

<http://ogden.basic-english.org/>

Protolinguist resources: Teaching yourself phonetics/phonology

<http://allthingslinguistic.tumblr.com/post/40375921441/protolinguist-resources-teaching-yourself>

Protolinguist resources: Teaching yourself morphology

<http://allthingslinguistic.tumblr.com/post/40962717566/protolinguist-resources-teaching-yourself-morphology>

Protolinguist resources: Teaching yourself syntax

<http://allthingslinguistic.tumblr.com/post/41559747481/protolinguist-resources-teaching-yourself-syntax>

SIL Fieldworks Language Explorer (FLEX)

<http://fieldworks.sil.org/flex>

SIL Field Linguist's Toolbox

<http://www-01.sil.org/computing/toolbox/>

APPENDIX A - IPA Representation of Sounds in English

IPA	Traditional	Representative words
ə	ə	banana, collide, abut, humdrum
ɚ	er	operation, further, urger
æ	ă	mat, map, mad, gag, snap, patch
eɪ	ā	day, fade, date, aorta, drape, cape
ɑ	ō	bother, cot
aʊ	ow	now, loud, out
b	b	b aby, rib
tʃ	ch	ch in, nature
d	d	d id, adder
ɛ	ě	bet, bed, peck
i	ē	beat, nosebleed, evenly, e asy, mealy
f	f	f ifty, cuff
g	g	g o, big, gift
h	h	h at, ahead
ɪ	ī	tip, banish, active
aɪ	ī	site, side, buy, tripe
dʒ	j	j ob, gem, edge, join, judge
k	k	k in, cook, ache
l	l	l ily, pool
m	m	m urmur, dim, nymph
n	n	n o, own
ŋ	ng	ng , singer, finger, ink
oʊ	ō	bone, know, beau
ɔ	aw	saw, all, gnaw, caught
ɔɪ	oy	coin, destroy
p	p	p epper, lip
r	r	r ed, rarity, car
s	s	s ource, less
ʃ	sh	sh y, mission, machine, special

t	t	tie, attack, late, later, latter
θ	th	thin, ether
ð	th	then, either
u	oo	soon, rule, youth
ʊ	oo	pull, wood, book
v	v	vivid, invite
w	w	we, away
j	y	yard, young, cue, curable
z	z	zone, raise
ʒ	zh	vision, azure, measure

APPENDIX B - Sentence Syntaxes

Select the formulas that correspond to your chosen Word Order and Branching Order, along with the formulas marked “ALL”.

Note that items in braces ({}) are optional, and that a bar (|) indicates an exclusive “or”

VSO: sentence ::= verb_phrase {subject_phrase} {object_phrase}

VOS: sentence ::= verb_phrase {object_phrase} {subject_phrase}

SVO: sentence ::= {subject_phrase} verb_phrase {object_phrase}

SOV: sentence ::= {subject_phrase} {object_phrase} verb_phrase

OVS: sentence ::= {object_phrase} verb_phrase {subject_phrase}

OSV: sentence ::= {object_phrase} {subject_phrase} verb_phrase

NA: subject_phrase ::= noun_instance {noun_modifier}

AN: subject_phrase ::= {noun_modifier} noun_instance

VA: verb_phrase ::= VERB {verb_modifier}

AV: verb_phrase ::= {verb_modifier} VERB

ALL: noun_instance ::= NOUN | PRONOUN

ALL: verb_modifier ::= ADVERB | tense_marker | etc.

ALL: noun_modifier ::= ADJECTIVE | NUMBER | ARTICLE | etc.

ALL: object_phrase ::= subject_phrase | adjective_phrase | sentence

APPENDIX C - Extracting a Phonology by Disassembling Text

By systematically separating a sample of text into its component pieces, a set of character tables can be built. The individual words are separated into vowel and consonant clusters.

Source text:

Et Earello Endoreenna utulien. Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn Ambar metta

*Ilu Iluvatar en kare eldain a firimoin ar antarota mannar Valion: numessier Toi aina, mana, meldielto -
enga morion: Talantie. Mardello Melko lende: marie Eldain en karier Isil, nan hildin Ur-anar. Toi irimar.
Ilqainen antar annar lestanen Iluvataren. Ilu vanya, fanya, eari, i-mar, ar ilqa imen. Irima ye Numenor.
Nan uye sere indo-ninya simen, ullume; Ten si ye tyelma, yeva tyel ar-i-narqelion, ire ilqa yeva notina,
hostainieva, yallume; ananta uva tare farea, ufarea! Man tare antava nin Iluvatar, Iluvatar enyare tar i
tyel, ire Anarinya qeluva?*

The second sentence in the example above would be broken out as follows:

s i n o m e / m a r u v a n / a r / h i l d i n y a r / t e n n /
a m b a r / m e t t a

Then the letter clusters are each placed into one of six categories; Initial Vowels (V1), Initial Consonants (C1), Middle Vowels (V2), Middle Consonants (C2), Final Vowels (V3), or Final Consonants (C3).

Text: sinome maruvan ar hildinyar tenn ambar metta

V1:				a					a					
C1:	s		m			h			t			m		
V2:	i	o		a	u	a		i	i	ya	e		a	e
C2:		n	m		r	v		l	d	n			mb	tt
V3:			e											a
C3:					n	r			r	nn			r	

Record the letter schemes for each of the words

sinome	->	C1	V2	C2	V2	C2	V3	
maruvan	->	C1	V2	C2	V2	C2	V2	C3
ar	->	V1	C3					
hildinyar	->	C1	V2	C2	V2	C2	V2	C3
tenn	->	C1	V2	C3				
ambar	->	V1	C2	V2	C3			
metta	->	C1	V2	C2	V3			

Note that every scheme will start with V1 or C1, and end with V3 or C3. Because of the way the words are broken

down, there will always be an alternation of V and C, and only V2 or C2 occur in the middle of a word.

For the full sample text, the extracted phonology and morphology would be as follows.

- V1:** a, ai, e, ea, i, u, ya, ye
C1: f, h, k, l, m, n, q, s, t, v
V2: a, ai, e, i, ie, io, o, oi, u, ya, ye
C2: f, l, ld, lk, ll, lm, lq, lt, m, mb, n, nd, ng, nn, nt, r, rd, rq, s, ss, st, t, tt, v
V3: a, e, ea, i, ie, o, oi, u, uye, ya, ye
C3: l, n, nn, r, t

Letter schemes

V1C2V2C2V2C2V2C2V2C3
 V1C2V2C2V2C2V2C3
 V1C2V2C2V2C2V2
 V1C2V2C2V2C3
 V1C2V2C2V2
 V1C2V2C3
 V1C2V2
 V1C3
 C1V2C2V2C2V2C2V2
 C1V2C2V2C2V2C3
 C1V2C2V2C2V2
 C1V2C2V2C3
 C1V2C2V2
 C1V2C3
 C1V2

Below are some words that were randomly generated using these character tables (note that the program used to create these words took into account the frequency of occurrence of the letter groupings and word forms).

imosta, ina, ulin, aneru, yelmattyenon, maldyanora, tolan, ambonair, yen, ima, tiongin, rurerie, urar, man, usaldi, irerqe, monte, utenta, mantan, tair, syenteror, erimasaven, maviel, moi, un, leteston, elelaruye, moita, yetti, aranirunn, ira, failderer, tave, tivasur, inarundy, antain, ailir, naingaran, ana, lamie, fattare, ten, muviol, tirarilye, ilaran, eama, amya, ilata, tannenuno, vin, faldellan, yendaildoi, tarier, un, tamo, miontilmal, tiren, fale, itin, illieldurdinin, memya, elier, uran, kairo, aldarar, aramya, ya, totye, yeme, yellar, tundangar, arieroro, vumbin, yen, ear, easan, taldi, ton, teniol, ainyen, imaivarin, miendeller, aron, vambemur, tifa, milama

APPENDIX D - Word Lists**Nouns**

account, acid, act, air, amount, angle, animal, ant, apparatus, apple, arch, arm, army, art, authority, baby, back, bag, balance, ball, band, base, basin, basket, bath, bed, bee, bell, berry, beverage, bird, bit, bite, blade, blood, board, boat, body, bone, book, boot, bottle, box, boy, brain, brake, branch, brass, bread, brick, bridge, brother, brush, bucket, building, bulb, business, butter, button, cake, camera, canvas, card, carriage, cart, cat, cause, chain, chalk, chance, cheese, chest, chin, church, circle, clock, cloth, cloud, coal, coat, collar, color, comb, committee, company, condition, connection, copper, cord, cork, cotton, country, cow, crack, credit, crime, cup, current, curtain, curve, cushion, danger, daughter, day, death, debt, degree, detail, direction, disease, distance, dog, door, drain, drawer, dress, drop, dust, ear, earth, edge, education, egg, end, engine, error, event, example, existence, expert, eye, face, fact, family, farm, father, feather, fiction, field, finger, fire, fish, flag, flame, floor, flower, fly, food, foot, fork, form, fowl, frame, friend, front, fruit, future, garden, girl, glass, glove, goat, gold, government, grain, grass, group, growth, gun, hair, hammer, hand, harbor, harmony, hat, head, heart, heat, history, hole, hook, horn, horse, hospital, hour, house, how, humor, ice, idea, impulse, industry, ink, insect, instrument, insurance, iron, island, jelly, jewel, join, journey, kettle, key, knee, knife, knot, land, language, law, lead, leaf, leather, leg, letter, level, library, lid, light, limit, line, linen, lip, liquid, list, lock, machine, man, manager, map, mark, market, marriage, mass, match, meal, meat, memory, metal, middle, milk, mind, mine, minute, mist, money, monkey, month, moon, morning, mother, motion, mountain, mouth, muscle, music, nail, name, nation, neck, needle, nerve, net, news, night, noise, nose, note, number, nut, office, oil, opinion, orange, organization, ornament, oven, owner, page, pain, paint, paper, parcel, part, past, paste, payment, peace, pen, pencil, person, picture, pig, pin, pipe, place, plane, plant, plate, pleasure, plow, pocket, point, poison, porter, position, pot, potato, powder, power, present, price, prison, profit, property, prose, pull, pump, punishment, purpose, quality, rail, rain, range, rat, rate, ray, receipt, record, relation, religion, representative, reward, rhythm, rice, ring, river, road, rod, roof, room, root, rule, sail, salt, sand, scale, school, science, scissors, screw, sea, seat, secretary, seed, self, sense, servant, sex, shade, shame, sheep, shelf, ship, shirt, shoe, side, sign, silk, silver, sister, size, skin, skirt, sky, slope, smash, smell, smile, smoke, snake, sneeze, snow, soap, society, sock, son, song, sort, sound, soup, space, spade, sponge, spoon, spring, square, stage, stamp, star, start, statement, station, steam, steel, stem, step, stick, stitch, stocking, stomach, stone, store, story, street, structure, substance, sugar, summer, sun, system, table, tail, tax, tendency, theory, thing, thread, throat, thumb, thunder, ticket, time, tin, toe, tongue, tooth, top, town, train, tray, tree, trouble, trousers, umbrella, unit, value, verse, vessel, view, voice, wall, war, watch, water, wax, way, weather, week, weight, wheel, when, where, whip, whistle, who, why, wind, window, wine, wing, winter, wire, woman, wood, wool, word, world, worm, wound, year

Verbs

add, adjust, advertise, agree, amuse, answer, approve, approve, argue, attack, attempt, attract, awake, be, behave, believe, blow, boil, break, breathe, build, burn, burst, care, change, come, comfort, compare, compare, compete, compete, control, cook, copy, cough, cover, crawl, crush, crush, cry, damage, dampen, decide, decide, design, destroy, destroy, develop, die, digest, discover, discover, discuss, discuss, disgust, distribute, divide, do, doubt, drink, drive, eat, effect, exchange, excrete, expand, fall, fear, feed, feel, fight, find, fly, fold, force, get, give, give birth, go, grip, grow larger, guide, hate, have, hear, help, hope, ignite, increase, invent, judge, jump, keep, kick, kill, kiss, know, laugh, learn, learn, let, lift, like, listen, live, look, lose, love, make, measure, meet, move, need, nurture, observe, offer, operate, order, paint, play, polish, print, process, produce, protest, push, put, question, react, read, reason, regret, reign, remember, repair, request, respect, rest, roll, rub, run, run, say, see, seek, seem, select, send, sew, shake, shock, sing, sit, sleep, slide, slip, slither, smell (emit a scent), smell (sense), sneak, stand, steal, stop, stretch, suggest, support, surprise, swim, take, talk, taste, teach, teach, test, think, till, touch, trade, transport, trick, turn, twist, use, wait, walk, want, wash, waste, wave, work, write

Adverbs

abroad, accidentally, after, already, always, anywhere, carefully, correctly, downstairs, during, eagerly, easily, every, everywhere, fast, finally, here, here, home, inside, intentionally, just, last, later, loudly, never, next, now, nowhere, often, outside, patiently, quickly, quietly, rarely, recently, seldom, sometimes, somewhere, soon, then, there, there, tomorrow, underground, usually, when, while, yesterday

Adjectives

abundant, adorable, agreeable, alive, ancient, angry, beautiful, better, bewildered, big, bitter, brave, brief, broad, bumpy, calm, careful, chilly, chubby, clean, clever, clumsy, cold, colossal, cool, creepy, crooked, crooked, cuddly, curly, curved, damaged, damp, dead, deep, defeated, delicious, delightful, dirty, drab, dry, dusty, eager, early, easy, elegant, embarrassed, empty, faithful, famous, fancy, fast, fat, few, fierce, filthy, flaky, flat, fluffy, fresh, full, gentle, gifted, gigantic, greasy, great, grumpy, handsome, happy, heavy, helpful, helpless, high, hollow, hot, hot, huge, icy, immense, important, inexpensive, itchy, jealous, jolly, juicy, kind, large, late, lazy, light, little, lively, long, long, loose, low, magnificent, mammoth, many, massive, melted, miniature, modern, mushy, mysterious, narrow, nervous, nice, numerous, nutritious, obedient, obnoxious, odd, old, petite, plain, powerful, prickly, proud, puny, quaint, quick, rainy, rapid, relieved, repulsive, rich, rotten, round, salty, scary, scrawny, shallow, short, short, shy, silly, skinny, slow, small, sparkling, sparse, square, steep, sticky, straight, strong, substantial, sweet, swift, tall, tart, tasteless, tender, thankful, thoughtless, tiny, ugliest, uneven, uninterested, unsightly, uptight, vast, victorious, warm, weak, wet, wet, wide, witty, wooden, worried, wrong, young, zealous