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Anne Storch

It is always good to have a title for a paper that makes clear what it is about. In the wide and fascinating field of invented languages this is not always the case, which more often than not might have the unfortunate effect of many linguists being unaware of relevant publications they would have otherwise loved to read. Two of the most misleading titles that come to my mind here are Umberto Eco's *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea* ('The search

for the perfect language in European culture'; 1994) and Clemens J. Setz' *Die Bienen und das Unsichtbare* ('The bees and the invisible'; 2020). Setz' book is not at all about bees, and Eco misses a perfect language when he sees one, just on one of the last pages of the book. However, both books are about the invention of languages, offering rich and original analyses of the structures and intellectual history of numerous artificial languages of the Global

West, often using a hospitable anecdotal approach. Furthermore, Setz' book is a literary masterpiece for which the author was awarded the prestigious Georg Büchner prize.

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In his study of the European search for a perfect language, Umberto Eco first sets out to discuss philosophical languages, which were created or designed in order to achieve or enhance a congruency between sound and world, make the very origin of language and mankind transparent again, and to create a semiotic system on that basis that then could be understood universally. These languages were intellectual tasks, complicated games, but in early modernity also became expressions of ideologies of linguistic superiority and thus part of the epiphenomena of nationalism and imperialism (Bonfiglio 2010). Eco also mentions that philosophical languages continued to be of interest well after the end of scholastic traditions and also after the age of enlightenment. Rasta Talk (Schrenk 2015) is one of them, a language practice originating in Jamaica in the twentieth-century that is based on the philosophical thought that semiotic opacity and a mismatch between sound and meaning results in imbalanced and harmful relationships among people as well as between them and their natural and cosmic environment. However, Eco, concentrating on European and not Caribbean languages, demonstrates that other goals than spiritual well-being had been in the focus there at the same time, namely an almost totalitarian communicative transparency, very much in opposition to the spiritual fulfilment Rasta Talk is supposed to offer. Another example of the resistance against this form of control through transparency is the role advocated for

language in Glissant's Antillaisian thought and his defense of the right to opacity. Eco presents Solresol, a language based on the European musical scale and invented by François Soudre in 1827, as one of the examples for these continued attempts to create transparent universal codes, always based on Eurocentric perspectives. The languages designed for communication in outer space are another. Here, Eco mentions Lincos (designed by Hans A. Freudenthal in 1960) which was aimed at making even extra-terrestrials grasp the content of messages sent to them by (European) humans. Artificial intelligence is yet one more of his examples for the various aprioristic philosophical languages that since then have been created in order to make communication efficient and controllable.

But then Eco also discusses constructed international auxiliary languages spoken in the colonial world. It is important mentioning just where they were spoken – a colonial world –, because looking at Volapük and Esperanto in the way they are presented and discussed by Eco, the salient European features of these languages become obvious on yet another level. While morphology, word order and lexicon are those of European languages such as German and Latin, there are some features, for example of the phonology, that are particularly revealing in how they reflect Eurocentric imperial gazes. Johann Martin Schleyer, a German pastor and linguist, invented Volapük in 1879, in order to create a language that could be used all over the world. And in this world, it was important to make sure in a patronizing fashion, Eco writes, that there was no /r/ in the language, as otherwise the Chinese could not understand. And so, Schleyer's language, Eco argues, bases on word games played with the lexicon of German, French, Latin and few

other European languages, ironically making the resulting vocabulary hard to recognize for basically all learners, and alien to anybody speaking non-European languages. Exclusion of the larger part of the world's population is part of this world language game.

Moreover, Volapük recreates, in a strange, inversive way and aimed at users that belong to a different social class, that what was already there at the time: Namely a constructed language spoken in Germany and other parts of Europe by a large number of people. This pre-existing international auxiliary language has been called Rotwelsch, and other such ways of speaking are known as Manisch or Jenisch. These languages, too, are based on the creative manipulation of German words, as well as on the creation of a lexicon that includes material from other languages – not Latin, but Hebrew, Romani and Jiddish. However, as Martin Puchner (2021) demonstrates in his deep dive into the history of Rotwelsch and the marginalization of any traveling, mobile, open, dynamic group of people in Germany, this was a language that was despised by the bourgeois and educated, persecuted by the nazis and ostracized later on. And Schleyer's Volapük belonged to precisely the social realm where Rotwelsch was rejected and its speakers were (and continue to be) marginalized and criminalized.

Like Rotwelsch, Volapük had been mostly used in Germany and some other parts of Europe, being a language that transcended the same geographical boundaries as Rotwelsch, Jenisch and Manisch. But the latter were considered to belong to the street, while the former clearly was something for the realm inside, such as the interiors of middle-class institutions of learning. Fittingly, Schleyer's family was

well-established, and continued to be so; his grand great-nephew Hanns Martin Schleyer had been president of the employers' association in Germany, when he was murdered by the RAF in 1977, in the German Autumn (e.g. Fassbinder et al. 1978). It might seem a bit forced, but yet: are the missing /r/ in Volapük and the ignorant perspective on practices such as Rotwelsch, Manisch and Jenisch, from which one could have learned how something like a created auxiliary language works, not an interesting correlation? The claim to create a language that will be shared across the world and that yet is so German, so upper middle-class, so Eurocentric that it remained a project that was mostly used among a community of European academics and people connected to colonial administration, is closely connected to colonial and neo-colonial subjugation, of many forms, in many ways, and with violent consequences.

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Eco mentions that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been exceptionally rich in such constructed auxiliary languages. The German translation of his book, which I have been using, phrases this as follows:

Zu Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts kommt es zu einer imposanten Entwicklung des Kommunikations- und Transportwesens: Nun werde es möglich sein, meinten Couturat und Leau (1903), die Reise um die Welt in vierzig Tagen zu machen (es ist kaum dreißig Jahre her seit Jules Vernes prophetischen achtzig Tagen!), während Telephon und drahtlose Telegraphie im Handumdrehen Paris mit London und Turin mit Berlin verbinden. Die Leichtigkeit der Kommunikation hat eine entsprechende Zunahme an Wirtschafts-

beziehungen zur Folge, der europäische Markt dehnt sich weltweit aus, die großen Nationen besitzen Kolonien bis zu den Antipoden, und ihre Politik wird global. (Eco 1994: 322)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there is an imposing development of communication and transportation: now it will be possible, said Couturat and Leau (1903), to make the trip around the world in forty days (it is hardly thirty years since Jules Verne's prophetic eighty days!), while telephones and wireless telegraphy connect Paris to London and Turin to Berlin in the blink of an eye. The ease of communication results in a corresponding increase in economic relations, the European market expands worldwide, the great nations own colonies up to the antipodes, and their politics become global.<sup>1</sup>

Europe's search for a perfect language, Eco argues, was now guided by the need for a means of communication that served the needs of colonialism and globalization, as well as an interest of nationalists in the non-English-speaking parts of Europe to implement an international auxiliary language other than English. The many invented languages of the time changed in the way in which they were constructed: They are not purely aprioristic philosophical languages, as they use lexical roots from natural languages, but rather aposterioric languages which integrate these roots into a system of previously designed

morphological patterns. In a way, these languages resemble some of the invented languages that have been created in the colonized parts of the world, as a reaction to the colonial experience. A well-known example is Shuu Mum, a language invented by Sultan Ibrahim Mbouombouo Njoya of Bamum in the city of Foumban, under Germany's colonial rule in Cameroon. Sultan Njoya was able to establish considerable agency in defining his own role in the encounter, claiming that Bamum and Germany had much in common and could learn from one another. One aspect of such an exchange concerned the royal court: Not only did the Sultan replace the old palace with a large Prussian brick building, he also created a completely new language to be spoken in this environment.

Shuu Mum, the language he invented, was based on a lexicon mostly taken from German, French and English (as it was the case in the European constructed languages of the period in which Eco is interested) as well as on Bamum. These words were then manipulated,

Figure 1: Royal brick palace (Wikipedia commons)



<sup>1</sup> My translation, based on [www. DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator) (free version).

modified, altered according to a set of rules that seem to have been created on the basis of the comparison of the European languages with the Benue-Congo languages spoken in the Bamum kingdom. In other words, the shape of the language was not created on the basis of an interest in grammatical structure (as in the European Latin tradition of linguistics), but on the basis of mimetic practice.

What a wonderful principle in the invention of a language. It could be awful, too. Nico Nassenstein (2020) describes the same strategy at play in the creation of Mock-Chinese in Kinshasa, about a century later. What we get to see are the distorted images of the Other's Other.

Back in Foumban, back in time, Sultan Njoya would invite Europeans to the palace and elicit interesting lexical material in order to create a database for his constructed language. One of his informants was Anna Rein-Wuhrmann, a missionary who today is mostly remembered for her photographic work on Bamum. In some of her letters, Rein-Wuhrmann later remembered how the Sultan's linguistic work was done. Idelette Dugast (1950), using these documents, describes how Rein-Wuhrmann, who had come to Bamum in 1911 as a member of the Basle mission, contributed to the creation of Shuu Mum: by the time she was introduced to the Sultan, he had begun to develop a secret language, which also had its own secret script, and she was called to the palace often to provide the Sultan with what he called "beautiful words" – lexemes that seemed to have been experienced as being particularly characteristic for the Germans. The elicited forms were sometimes integrated into the secret language just as they were received, e.g., *rɔskɔnik* 'great king', *ɔɾnu* 'order', *liŋs* 'left', *komstu* 'do you come', etc., while others un-

derwent an interesting inversion. Short forms used in Bamum became long words, words with few consonants received more of them, mimicking long compounds and consonant clusters that are characteristic of German, but not for Bamum and other Grassfields languages. Examples include Bamum *ŋga-fa?* → Shuu Mum *ispinklan-lasan* 'servant', Bamum *tashi* → Shuu Mum *wabua-span* 'yours', Bamum *kɔsɛ* → Shuu Mum *muksuru-ruran* 'and, with', Bamum *ru* → Shuu Mum *waidan* 'force', as well as the (Swiss-) German name *Anna Wuhrmann* → Shuu Mum *Lasisvenère Pistenawaskopus*.

The language (which had been reserved for communication at the royal court), like many of the constructed languages of the time, eventually fell out of use. But the script continued to be used, and still is today, in everyday-life contexts, as heritage practice as well as in acts of political resistance.

The script, as the language, bears deep connections to colonial entanglements. Konrad Tuchscherer (2007) suggests that the inspiration for the script comes from Vai-speaking traders sailing down the West African coast and using a script that had emerged through trans-Atlantic interactions with Cherokee people, in the context of the Atlantic trade network, involving slave trade, exploitative plantation economy and settler colonialism. Yet, it is the deep South (Maxwell-Gibb forthcoming), an open, diverse space, and the intellectual hospitality of the Sultan and his court who transcended the horrors of colonialism and created a form of expression that retains the power to connect.

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In the discussion of why so many of Europe's constructed international auxiliary languages

have fallen out of use relatively quickly after their invention, mostly due to overcomplicated manipulation strategies, but also because of the paternalistic power relations their founders had with the respective communities of users, Eco makes an incorrect connection:

Zudem operieren die gemischten Sprachen, wenn sie Komposita bilden, mit begrifflichen Zusammenballungen, die eher an die Primitivität und Regressivität des Pidgin erinnern. Werden im Pidgin-Englisch die Dampfschiffe, je nachdem, ob sie Raddampfer sind oder Schraubenantrieb haben, als *outside-walkee-can-see* und *inside-walkee-no-can-see* bezeichnet, so heißt im Volapük die Juwelierhandlung *nobastonacan*, was ein Kompositum aus "Stein", "Handlung" und "Adel" darstellt. (Eco 1994: 326)

Moreover, when the mixed languages form composites, they operate with conceptual conglomerations that are more reminiscent of the primitivity and regressivity of pidgin. When in Pidgin English steamships are called *outside-walkee-can-see* and *inside-walkee-no-can-see*, depending on whether they are paddle steamers or screw-driven, in Volapük the jewelry store is called *nobastonacan*, which is a compound of "stone," "store," and "nobility."<sup>2</sup>

It has been a long time since steamers were the type of object to which examples for linguistic structures would refer. It does not seem to be the case though here that the discussion of languages referred to as "pidgin" has left the spirit of the times of the olden steamers behind. In spite of this: If there is any super-modern

language that has emerged from a context of "an imposing development of communication and transportation", where different communicative influences are brought together, coexisting in an open, hospitable way of speaking, that could be called a "perfect language", then it is a member of the many so-called "Pidgin" languages. There is hardly any way of speaking that is as successful globally (Faraclas 2020, Faraclas & Delgado 2021), as poetic and efficient at the same time, and as modern and dynamic as "Pidgins". Sadly, even though languages such as Naija emerged as widely spoken auxiliary languages at about the same time (Storch 2018) as the constructed international auxiliary languages invented by armchair Europeans, Eco misses them out completely. Which also might tell something about the social positionality and identity concepts of linguists, especially in the Global West.

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Almost three decades later, Clemens J. Setz turns the gaze to more contemporary means of travel. If I have not overlooked them, his book does not contain any steamers. Setz begins his journey into the wide field of constructed languages with a conversation he shared with the poet Mustafa Ahmed Jama, who uses a wheelchair and communicates with the help of Blissymbolics, a constructed language that enables more and more people to connect and communicate with their social environments, across any possible border. Suffering from cerebral palsy after birth, Jama and his family left Somalia and came to Sweden, where he still lives, in order to seek medical treatment for him. In a long and difficult process, Jama

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<sup>2</sup> My translation, based on [www.DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator) (free version).

learnt to communicate through Blissymbolics, and as a poet, he mostly writes using this language.

Setz is interested in those stories about constructed languages that make conceivable how these communicative practices help to overcome personal crisis, transcend various kinds of boundaries, make their users achieve agency, freedom from suppression and visibility in marginalizing settings. His tale of constructed languages is full of anecdotes telling of deeply felt humanism, offering a glimpse into what hospitable linguistics might be like. There are the stories of Charles Bliss whose Blissymbols was valued only late in its inventor's life, of the resistance of the users of constructed languages during fascism and their struggle against any other totalitarian regime, of the melancholy in lonely Volapük poetry, and of all the subversive and creative linguistic in(ter)ventions that helped to create utopias. He makes a wonderful observation about Esperanto: that only because it remained incomplete after Zamenhof's death, and was not designed and constructed up to a state of perfection, it could be used as a language that really connected people. Multilingual people using repertoires that consist of minority languages (and not just a bunch of standardized national languages) will be able to relate.

The book is also about more contemporary conlangs, constructed languages that are mostly shared on internet platforms, and often are used only among small communities of fantasy movie fans, gamers and cosplayers. Setz is open to all that, but his interest in all these languages is driven by something deeper than just curiosity or playfulness.

This is a fascinating journey for the reader, too. The snippets from his diary of 2015 that form part of the book (Setz 2020: 127-144) already make it clear that something is not at all in order with the author, over there in Vienna. And then, a few pages later:

In der Linguistik gibt es die sogenannte Sapir-Whorf-Hypothese, die eine direkte Kausalität zwischen einer gesprochenen Sprache und bestimmten Denkkonzepten annimmt. In ihrer starken Form, *eine gewisse Sprache bestimmt bzw. schafft gewisse Denkkonzepte im Kopf des Sprechers*, gilt sie inzwischen als weitgehend widerlegt, aber ihre schwache Form scheint eine alltägliche Wahrheit darzustellen: Bestimmte Sprachen *fördern* oder *vereinfachen* bestimmte Konzepte. So zum Beispiel das Denken in Himmelsrichtungen. (Setz 2020: 149)

In linguistics there is the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which assumes a direct causality between a spoken language and certain thinking concepts. In its strong form, *a certain language determines or creates certain thinking concepts in the mind of the speaker*, it is now considered largely disproved, but its weak form seems to represent an everyday truth: Certain languages *promote* or *simplify* certain concepts. For example, thinking in terms of cardinal directions.<sup>3</sup>

And then, after ten more pages:

Jetzt habe ich mich gut abgelenkt von der entsetzlichen Krise, in der ich 2015 steckte. Mir ist der Mensch, der ich damals war, zwar nicht peinlicher als der Mensch, der ich heute bin,

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<sup>3</sup> My translation, based on [www.DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator) (free version). Emphasis as in the original text.



aber dennoch war ich in diesem Sommer sehr nahe daran, irgendeine unheilbare Dummheit zu begehen. Meine These wäre, dass sich Menschen in solchen Krisen, in selbst verursachten Höllen, besonders danach sehnen, die Sapir-Whorf-Hypothese wäre 100% wahr und durch einen Neustart der Sprache ließe sich auch die Wirklichkeit neu starten in ein glorreiches Zeitalter vor dem Sündenfall. Vielleicht hantiere ich einfach in meinem Kopf mit den falschen Wörtern. Gäbe es die richtigen, ich würde mich in einen guten Menschen verwandeln. (Setz 2020: 159)

Now I have given myself a good distraction from the horrible crisis I was in in 2015. I am no more embarrassed by the person I was then than the person I am now, but nevertheless I came very close to committing some incurable stupidity that summer. My thesis would be that people in such crises, in self-inflicted hells, especially long for the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to be 100% true, and by rebooting language, reality could also be rebooted into a glorious age before the Fall. Perhaps I am simply handling the wrong words in my head. If there were the right ones, I would change into a good person.<sup>4</sup>

The perfect language here is the one that does not just enable people to interact across the many boundaries they experience in a colonized and globalized world, but one that actually unmakes this world and replaces it with something better, perhaps with a more primordial reality. And even though Setz writes about the many mundane and obvious connections between experienced despair

and the use of constructed languages in order to overcome any possible crisis, he is also concerned with the magical and utterly utopian meanings of conlangs. If we only find the right words, reality will change.

The idea seems attractive. Reboot and leave all the guilt and ruination behind. Setz develops his thoughts about the possibility of such a utopia as he explores the constructed language Láadan. This is a language invented by the American linguist and science fiction writer Suzette Haden Elgin in 1982 in order to test the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Haden Elgin assumed that most languages of the Global West are not well suited to express the views of women, but rather reflect the hegemony of men. The underlying binary between men and women already makes me suspicious, because isn't this just a trap. Setz also isn't fond of it, but he is probably more patient with language inventors than me, his reader.

Láadan has been designed as a language that (unlike the European natural languages, or say, more precisely, English) is gynocentric, suitable for the expression of women's views. But how could this be achieved? Using an approach that bases on the assumption of binary oppositions such as male : female, Haden Elgin has a clearcut answer to this: Láadan is just made to look – look, not sound, as this is all about writing, grammars, dictionaries, novels – like a non-Western language. And the opposite of Western languages is a language that has Southern features: Tone, a consonant system that looks like a mixture of Western Nilotic and \*Pama-Nyungan, no gender, agglutinative morphology, VSO word order, and so on. It is as stereotypical as it is plunder. Plundering

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<sup>4</sup> My translation, based on [www.DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator) (free version).

languages of the tropics, of the colonized world, but so what. If we only knew the right words, we would change into good people.

Setz seems to like the idea of creating a science fiction language that can serve as an example of how marginalized people could express themselves better. But he too is critical about binary oppositions. But while he remains skeptical about Haden Elgin's idea about women being more emotional, an idea that saliently resonates in the grammatical structure of Láadan, he is at least intrigued by the lexicon of the language:

Der Bereich, in dem Láadan unübertrefflich brilliant ist, ist der der Neologismen. Diese stellen für mich eine der übernehmenswertesten Eigenschaften dieser Sprache dar. Im Grunde sind sie, würde man sie als Liste publizieren, ein großer, luzider Roman über das Leben, vor allem jenes von Frauen, zu allen Zeiten. (Setz 2020: 154)

The area in which Láadan is unsurpassably brilliant is that of neologisms. For me, these are one of the most endearing features of the language. Basically, if they were published as a list, they would be a great lucid novel about life, especially women's life, at all times.<sup>5</sup>

What follows is a list of Láadan lexemes with explanations of their meaning and sometimes also their construction principles. Much of what is presented is simply considered worth mentioning and original because German has no equivalent ("für die sich aus den Bausteinen des Deutschen kaum ein eigenes Wort bilden lässt", Setz 2020: 158). Yet the pejorative connotations added to lexemes such as "holiday" and

"guest" (in the sense of "they can be a burden to women"), as well as expressions of complex emotional states, intentions, physical conditions and so on are not all that unattainable in many natural languages other than German. Such meanings and concepts are expressed through particular noun classes, ideophones, discourse markers, and so forth, in languages all around the world.

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The observation that original and interesting concepts are expressed in remarkable ways through Láadan and other constructed languages that Setz explores in his book is not followed suit by the crucial question: Why? He, like most other people writing about those languages (e.g. Adams 2011, Okrent 2009, Peterson 2015) does not ask that question. As if the weird complex structures of those languages are already enough to write about. But yet: Why have the creators of these languages, specifically those in the late twentieth and twenty-first century, designed them as languages that resemble non-European, non-Western, and preferably tropical or central Asian languages?

In his pathbreaking work, Nicholas Faraclas (2012, Faraclas & Delgado 2021) has embedded linguistic analysis in the careful investigation of the social and political history of the languages under research. And he employed a perspective that enabled him to obtain a deep understanding of the subversive agency and power of marginalized and subaltern people. To look at languages as being the results of their colonial histories, but also, and equally so, of the ability of their speakers to be rene-

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<sup>5</sup> My translation, based on [www.DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator) (free version).

gades and maroons against the exploitative and plundering colonial and neo-colonial orders imposed on them very much helps to change our perspective. Yet, as Setz helps us to understand, the search for the perfect language, the one that does help to reboot the world, still bases on another view of the world, one that I find depicted in mid-century images, where the world's order is maintained in pictures that look as being drawn for children. The languages from which conlang creators such as Haden Elgin take structural features as well as semantic patterns are seen as languages that just sit where they have "always" sat, and no social and political history ever left a stain on them.

So maybe the question of why these languages are designed in the way they are needs to be replied by saying, because this is how Indigenous languages and the colonized world still need to be constructed in the Global West. In the constructed South, being seen as a static world, which is always the world of the Others (Fabian 2002 [1983]), the languages of the Indigenes can serve as data mines for whatever is going to be created. And in these fantasies, aren't the non-European languages and speakers reliable, not changing into something contemporary, not complaining, not giving us a bad conscience? We are saved, as women, as people in crisis, as people facing global meltdown, by the static, exotic languages of all those who remain in their "traditional" realities, always ready to give us unpolluted and healing words. What kind of twist has happened here: clad in their science fiction costumes, conlangs turn into utopian inversions of Europe, through erasure of violent colonial history as well as of the powerful agency of colonized people.



Figure 2: Africa in good order (photo by author, Knechtsteden monastery 2019)

And why is this so problematic? I think because it not only constructs non-Western languages as static and "traditional" through creating stereotyped images of them, but also because it bases on the assumption that non-European languages are resources for data mining, just as the colonized world is full of resources that can be exploited: Coltan, oil, gas, coffee. Modern slavery sustains the "imposing development of communication and transportation" of our time, so why even care if anyone's language is exploited as well, for the sake of rebooting the planet. This is problematic because it is violent in the way it negates

and silences contemporary people and because it is plunder uninterested in anything else but just personal wellbeing.

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It seems as if Setz had just used the last few opportunities to grasp the few instances of humanity and hospitality that remained. What I myself find in the numerous websites where conlangs are created, presented and discussed, is a spectacle of exotism and orientalism. At the same time this spectacle mimics linguistic practice and genres. The invented languages presented bear invented names, and oftentimes they also have invented endonyms, are spoken by a particular number of speakers, on an invented planet or continent, or in the Atlantic or in Northern Korea. Some languages have already become extinct, and then the time span in which the given language was once spoken is mentioned (5000 BC – 1000 BC, or from -2500 to +2500 using their calendar). What follows is a summary of the structural features of the language. It is striking that so many extraterrestrials and inhabitants of the Atlantic speak split-ergative languages.

My visit to Conlang.fandom.com included the attempt to create my own language, which is easy, as one just operates a drop-down menu, picking features, a bit like creating a personal profile on a casual dating site (Nassenstein & Storch 2020). I also visited an already created language, Shinsali.<sup>6</sup> Shinsali is not split-ergative, but nominative-accusative. It is spoken by 150.000 people in the Shinsali Confederacy, an island nation in the Atlantic. This is about all we get to know, and I think if anyone wants to

obtain a fuller picture, they might need to watch a fantasy film.

Shinsali is an agglutinative-polysynthetic language and hasn't got tone. Its verbal system is slightly more complex than that of many of the Benue-Congo languages which I know, and this is the reason why I am picking it as an example for what it is made to look like. There are various aspect, mood and deictal affixes that are added to the verb stem, as well as deictal and object shape suffixes. The aspect markers may serve as an example of the intended complexity here:

	Affix	Meaning
Imperfective	∅	ongoing nature
Perfective	<i>no</i>	viewed as a simple whole
Progressive	<i>la</i>	viewed as ongoing and evo/lving
Stative	<i>ju</i>	viewed as ongoing but not evolving
Momentaneous	<i>ro</i>	takes place at one point in time
Inceptive	<i>sanu</i>	beginning of a new action
Inochiative	<i>lhe</i>	beginning of a new state

<sup>6</sup> <https://conlang.fandom.com/wiki/Shinsali>

Terminative	<i>wu</i>	end of an action/ state
Repetitive	<i>gi</i>	the action is repeated
Conative	<i>ta</i>	attempted action
Defective	<i>my</i>	the action almost happened
Intentional	<i>najo</i>	the action was intentional
Accidental	<i>a</i>	the action was an accident
Imminent	<i>teja</i>	the action will happen for sure

Table 1: Shinsali aspect affixes

The *la* for the progressive is somehow nice, as it resembles TAM markers of relatable meaning in some Benue-Congo languages. Like the whole structure does. How the affixes are combined and finite verb forms are constructed is exemplified, like for almost all the other conlangs on the site, in a translation of the first paragraph of the declaration of the human rights.

But other than in the real world, human rights are pointless here. The Shinsali Confederacy remains frozen in fantasy time. It remains unreal, meant to be used only to speak to ourselves. Everything turns into a fantasy here, also the languages out there that serve as data mines, so why should we care about human rights? Maybe because it feels better if

they are acknowledged on Shinsali too; Indigenous language flair and human rights as part of the feelgood epistemes in linguistics and elsewhere.

And while I look at all the tables and summaries on the website, I am reminded of a game that was occasionally played when I was still a student, studying African linguistics. Sometimes, our small group of students who attended language classes in Hausa, Ewe, Fulfulde and Swahili found that what we learned there was so exciting that we just couldn't stop. And taking off from the verbal extensions of Fulfulde, we would invent more and more of them, and more tenses and aspects, more numbers in the pronominal system. And for all of these invented features of invented languages (which never lived longer than just for that moment) were based on some Latin words that came in handy: there were insultatives, paucalitives, inhibitives, symmetricalitives – just because Latin was still the metalanguage of linguistics, and our understanding of grammar still based on the analysis of its structure. But didn't we also base our invented languages on mimetic practice, more precisely on the mimesis of linguistics itself?

And "Pidgin"? We never played games that created any. We mimicked tables of morphemes, not life.

It is, in the light of these anecdotes, intriguing that those languages that so decidedly emerged as a consequence of modernity, which has its dark beginnings in the trans-Atlantic trade networks, plantation economies and the forced mobilities of large numbers of people and objects, are almost always missing in the conlang games. What conlangs such as Láadan and Shinsali seem to need are morphological complexity, very particular consonant systems,

strange writing systems and so on. That the languages that are part and parcel of modernity are hardly ever taken as models for the creation of exotic, extraterrestrial codes might also have something to do with the ancient, secret flair of linguistics' tables of morphemes, which are turned into a commodity fetish here. Maybe this is the crack in the wall through which we can still pass: just not buy it.

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