

English? What's That?

a framelang by Arayaz

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0 — The Data

0.1 — Personal Names

A selection of personal names.

Ashling Kennedy

Yvonne Hughes

Clodagh Kelly

Lily Headly-Smythe

Bicycle Billy

0.2 — Place and Brand Names

Names of entities that are not human beings.

Dublin

Colleen

Trix

Mercedes

0.3 — Short Phrases

A collection of short phrases, presented here with definitions.

ominous silence

“ominous silence”

surefire success

“surefire success”

soap opera

“soap opera”

sweet sixteen

“sweet sixteen”

0.4 — Sentences

Two full sentences in the language, again with translations.

Rancor and regret generated insomnia.

“Rancor and regret generated insomnia.”

Extreme familiarity and empty distance hung together.

“Extreme familiarity and empty distance hung together.”

1 — Introduction

So I was given the wonderful task of creating a language for the TV adaptation of the book *Sushi for Beginners*. This book already featured a language, but all that was available was small scraps of it, from which I had to develop a complete language.

I'd never done anything like this before, but really, how hard could it be?

2 — Phonology

2.1 — Preliminaries

As I looked through the procured selection of examples, what immediately struck me was the prevalence of <y> used in what seemed to be a vocalic position.

Kennedy

Yvonne

Kelly

Lily

Headly-Smythe

Bicycle

Billy

familiarity

empty

Curiously, despite its ubiquitousness in the personal names, it was rather rare in the phrases and sentences given. I spent some time thinking through reasons for this, and eventually settled on this: the sound represented by vocalic <y> historically only appeared in loanwords from some neighboring language, most of which happened to be names.

These loanwords, of course, were old, and had been integrated into the language just as surely as native roots, but it was something to keep in mind as I analyzed the grammar (seeing as grammatical particles, say, are unlikely to be loaned).

I also noted that both <c> and <k> appear. They of course had different values, since the romanization was completely logical, but what values could they be?

2.2 — Consonants

Eventually, I settled on the following consonant inventory, presented along with the romanization that I interpreted to be a sound (unless that romanization is identical to the IPA) and an example of a word including it.

	Labial	Coronal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	p, b <i>soap, Bicycle</i>	t, d <i>sweet, Clodagh</i>	tʃ <c> <i>Clodagh</i>	k, g <i>Kelly, regret</i>	
Fricative	f, v <i>surefire, Yvonne</i>	s, θ <th> <i>Hughes, Smythe</i>	ʃ <sh> <i>Ashling</i>	x, ɣ <gh> <i>Trix, Hughes</i>	h <i>Hughes</i>
Nasal	m <i>Smythe</i>	n <i>Yvonne</i>		ŋ <ng> <i>Ashling</i>	
Liquid		r, l <i>Mercedes, Ashling</i>		w <i>sweet</i>	

Looking at this, I immediately noticed some gaps. For example, there was no /z ð ʒ/, despite the inclusion of their voiceless equivalents and that of other voiced fricatives. However, there could be some justification. The presence of /ɣ/, though, made me doubtful of any lenition of voiced fricatives, since it was certainly the most volatile of the voiced fricatives presented. I did think I could get away with a lack of /ð/, depending on the source of the /θ/. But I included /z ʒ/.

I was also rather thrown off by the lack of /j/. There wasn't really an easy justification for this that I can think of, so I added it.

In addition, I noted the absence of /dz/. This, too, I'd rather add than justify; but so as to limit the number of additional phonemes I added, I said that /dz~j/ is one phoneme, which

varied depending on some circumstance. This suggested a parallel process with /g~w/, though, so I went back to analyze their occurrences.

[w] only occurred once, in *sweet*. Here, it occurred in the environment /C_V/. [g] occurred three times: in *regret*, *generated*, and *together*, which were /V_C/, /#_V/, and /V_V/. This was consistent with a rule /g/ > [w] / C_V. Conveniently, this also got rid of the issue of the ambiguity of <ng> between /ŋ/ and /ng/ or /ŋg/ – the latter would become /nw/ or /ŋw/.

This left the following consonant inventory.

	Labial	Coronal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	p, b p, b	t, d t, d	tʃ, dʒ~j c, j	k, g~w k, g~w	
Fricative	f, v f, v	θ, s, z θh, s, z	ʃ, ʒ sh, zh	x, ɣ x, gh	h
Nasal	m m	n n		ŋ ng	
Liquid		r, l r, l			

/dʒ g/ became [j w] in the environment C_V.

Before considering the vowels, I wanted to define some semblance of phonotactics. It seemed that every consonant could be geminated, even stops, and even at word boundaries (both demonstrated by *success*). However, no geminates occurred next to other consonants, which I made a rule.

The syllable structure seemed to be perfectly reasonable at first, looking to be something like (C)(C)V(V)(C), with permitted onset clusters being Cl, Cr, and sC – until I looked at the sentence *Extreme familiarity and empty distance hung together*. This includes not only a word-final cluster (*and*), but also a cluster that violates the onset cluster rules – *mpt*,

in *empty*. However, I resolved both problems by declaring that a cluster of a homorganic nasal followed by a stop was a valid coda as well.

That did it for consonants, and for syllable structure to boot. Then I took a look at vowels.

2.3 — Vowels

There were six characters in the example that I interpreted as vowels: <a e i o u y>, all of which I decided were pronounced as their IPA values. (Additionally, see my note above, under 2.1 — Preliminaries, about <y>.)

Vowels also occasionally appeared in sequence. I noted /ea ee ou oa ia/ in the example. I chose to interpret /ee/ as a long vowel /e:/, and the others as diphthongs /eə ow oə ja/. Thinking on the possibilities presented by this, I eventually settled on the following diphthong inventory. (/y/, being found only in loanwords, does not form diphthongs.)

	-a	-e	-i	-o	-u
a-	a:		aj		aw
e-	eə	e:	ej		ew
i-	iə		i:		
o-	oə		oj	o:	
u-	uə				u:

This finished up phonology for us.

3 — Grammatical Structure

3.1 — Names and Phrases

Once I was finished with phonology, I started in on grammar. Looking through the names, very little was available, but one name did take some consideration: *Lily Headly-Smythe*. The hyphenated second element suggested some grammatical construction there, but it was hard to know what. However, it was something to consider going forward.

The phrases, too, suggested little. All were a noun and adjective, but there was nothing to suggest which was which.

But then it was time to analyze the sentences.

3.2 — Sentences

Rancor and regret generated insomnia.

“Rancor and regret generated insomnia.”

Extreme familiarity and empty distance hung together.

“Extreme familiarity and empty distance hung together.”

One word was shared between the sentences: *and*. What could this have corresponded to? Well, both sentences were in past tense, so perhaps *and* is a past tense marker. It always appeared near the beginning of the sentence, which suggested that the verb, too, is near the beginning.

With *rancor and regret...*, *rancor* was most likely the verb, so I took it to be VSO or VOS word order. There were two words before *and* in the second sentence, but the verb there was modified by an adverb meaning “together.” With a verb-initial language, adverbs usually follow the verb, so *familiarity* must be “together.” That would mean *extreme* was the verb.

Both verbs had third-person plural subjects (if I took it to be nominative-accusative alignment, that is). However, looking at them, I saw no common element that could be marking this — so the language had no agreement marking.

Next, I finished off the first sentence’s analysis. *Regret generated insomnia* corresponds to “rancor and regret [...] insomnia.” It was only three words, so the conjunction “and” must have been expressed either via a clitic or simply through juxtaposition. To determine this, I looked at the second sentence, which also has an “and.” I saw no shared elements, so the meaning of “and” could be attributed to pure juxtaposition.

There was nothing to indicate whether the word order was VOS or VSO, so it was up to me whether *regret generated* was “rancor and regret” and *insomnia* was “insomnia,” or if

generated insomnia was “rancor and regret” and *regret* was “insomnia.” I settled for the latter, giving us VOS word order.

With VOS word order established, I could complete my analysis of *extreme familiarity and empty distance hung together*. *Empty distance hung together* corresponded to “extreme familiarity and empty distance.” With head-initial word order, the adjectives must have both followed the nouns, meaning *empty* and *hung* were “familiarity” and “distance,” respectively, and *distance* and *together* were respectively “extreme” and “empty.”

4 – Final Analysis

4.1 – Phonology

The language's consonant inventory is as follows.

	Labial	Coronal	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	p, b <i>p, b</i>	t, d <i>t, d</i>	tʃ, dʒ~j <i>c, j</i>	k, g~w <i>k, g~w</i>	
Fricative	f, v <i>f, v</i>	θ, s, z <i>th, s, z</i>	ʃ, ʒ <i>sh, zh</i>	x, ɣ <i>x, gh</i>	h
Nasal	m <i>m</i>	n <i>n</i>		ŋ <i>ng</i>	
Liquid		r, l <i>r, l</i>			

/g dʒ/ become [w j] when following another consonant.

Its vowels are as follows.

	Front	Back
High	i, i:, y	u, u:
Mid	e, e:	o, o:
Low	a, a:	

/y/ occurs only in what were once loanwords (though they have been naturalized and fully incorporated into the language).

The following diphthongs are permitted.

	-a	-e	-i	-o	-u
a-	(aː)		aj		aw
e-	eḁ	(eː)	ej		ew
i-	iḁ		(iː)		
o-	oḁ		oj	(oː)	
u-	uḁ				(uː)

The language's syllable structure is (C)(C)V(V)(C)(C), with the permitted onset clusters being sC, Cl, and Cr, and the permitted coda clusters being a nasal followed by a homorganic stop. Any consonant may be geminated, unless it is adjacent to another consonant.

4.2 — Grammar

This language has VOS word order, and is head-initial in all cases: it has prepositions, and adjectives and adverbs follow the nouns or verbs they modify. There is no inflection for basic concepts such as agreement, although the past tense is marked with the postverbal particle *and*. A corresponding future particle likely exists, but is not attested in this limited corpus.

4.3 — Lexicon

Below is a basic lexicon of the language (not including proper names).

<i>and</i>	part.	[marks past tense]
<i>distance</i>	adj.	extreme, intense
<i>empty</i>	n.	familiarity, closeness, togetherness
<i>extre</i>	v.	to exist
<i>extreme</i>	v.	to be thickly and intensely present (e.g. of an emotion)
[from <i>extre</i> “to exist” + <i>-me</i> , a nonproductive augmentative]		
<i>familiarity</i>	adv.	together, at the same time
<i>generated</i>	n.	anger, bitterness, rancor
<i>hung</i>	n.	distance [esp. emotional]
<i>insomnia</i>	n.	regret
<i>ominous</i>	n.	silence
<i>opera</i>	adj.	dramatic, thrilling, full of twists and turns
<i>rancor</i>	v.	to create, to generate
<i>reg</i>	n.	lack, loss; debit
<i>regret</i>	n.	insomnia [from <i>reg</i> “lack” + <i>ret</i> “sleep”]
<i>ret</i>	n.	sleep
<i>silence</i>	adj.	ominous, foreboding
<i>sixtee</i>	num.	sixteen
<i>sixteen</i>	adj.	sixteenth [from <i>sixtee</i> “sixteen” + <i>-(i)n</i> , which forms ordinals]
<i>soap</i>	n.	serial drama, story told in parts
<i>success</i>	adj.	guaranteed, certain

surefire n. success, accomplishment

sweet n. party, celebration

together adj. empty, unfulfilled