

Creating a Language Activities and class material

For students:

The following material is meant as a series of exercises to help you create your own language. It contains three parts, one on sounds, one on words, and one on sentences. Each section introduces a couple of design choices. Read the explanation first and then go through the activities.

For teachers:

These materials are intended to be used to structure a series of classes around. Each section starts with an explanation of some basic concepts and design choices, which can function as the basis for a lecture. Then you will find one or two activities, which you can have students work on in class. Each design choice has consequences for what follows, so it is important to make sure that students stick to the choices they make!

Each section is intended to be covered in roughly two or three classes. We have focused on a small set of design choices for each topic, but more can easily be added to expand the material.

If you make use of these materials, please let us know. We are always happy to hear from you and see some of the languages you have made, or answers any questions you may have. Also, some additional material can be made available on request.

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Part 1: Picking sounds

The first step to creating your language is picking the **sounds** you want.

Note: Some of the letters below are symbols in the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). See page 3.

Design choice 1:

What consonants do you want?

- ▶ One type of consonant is called a **stop**, because you can stop the flow of air out of your mouth when you make it.

Try it out by making some of the following sounds:

How do you stop airflow?	Sound
Lips	<i>p, b</i>
Tongue against ridge behind teeth	<i>t, d</i>
Tongue against roof of mouth	<i>k, g</i>

You can use stops to make your language sound harsh or halting. Klingon has a lot of stops!

(To listen to Klingon, look here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7Nokw5i8aY>)

- ▶ Another type of consonant is called a **fricative**, because you create **friction** in the flow of air to make them.

Try it out by making some of the following sounds:

How do you create friction?	Sound
Teeth and bottom lip	<i>f, v</i>
Tongue against teeth	<i>th</i>
Tongue against ridge behind teeth	<i>s, z</i>
Tongue against ridge and palate	<i>ʃ, ʒ</i>
Tongue against roof of mouth	<i>x</i>

- English actually has **two *th* sounds!** Linguists write them as θ and δ . You can hear the difference in words like *thigh* (θ) and *thy* (δ).
- The ʃ is the sound in *ship* and ʒ is the sound in *measure*.
- The *x* is how linguists write the sound in *loch*.

You can use fricatives to make your language sound whispery and silent, but also sinister. Parseltongue uses a lot of fricatives!

(To listen, look here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgXVRp_mSZg)

- ▶ Languages also make **nasal** sounds. Like with stops, you stop the flow of the air. But with nasals, air comes out of your nose instead!

How do you stop airflow?	Sound
Lips	<i>m</i>
Tongue against ridge behind teeth	<i>n</i>
Tongue against roof of mouth	<i>ng</i>

- Although you write it with two letters in English, *ng* (as in words like *sing*) is one sound! Linguists sometimes write it as η .

- ▶ The last types of consonants we'll talk about are **liquids** and **glides**, which are made in different ways.

	Sound
Liquids	<i>r, l</i>
Glides	<i>j, w</i>

- The glide *j* is usually written as *y* in English. It is the sound in *y*ear or *y*ou.

Using a lot of liquids and glides will make your language sound more melodious, like Sindarin (from *Lord of the Rings*)!

(To listen, look here: <https://www.youtube.com/v/VIEhEw52kBg>)

There are actually many more types of consonants! Have a look at the **International Phonetic Alphabet** if you want to find some more (see below).

A note on spelling and sound:

The way a word is spelled doesn't always match how it is pronounced. For this reason, linguists make use of the **International Phonetic Alphabet**, an alphabet that has a unique symbol for each sound (like η for *sing*). We have sometimes indicated the symbol used in the IPA. It's up to you whether you use it or not!

Design choice 2:

What vowels do you want?

- ▶ The second type of sound is a **vowel**. Vowels involve continuous airflow, with your tongue in different positions.
- ▶ Although English spelling only has five pure vowels (sometimes *y* represents a vowel), there are actually many more vowel sounds in English. Here are some of the different vowels and how linguists write them!

Vowel sound How linguists write it (IPA)

<i>b<u>a</u>it</i>	ei
<i>b<u>e</u>t</i>	ɛ
<i>b<u>i</u>t</i>	ɪ
<i>b<u>ee</u>t</i>	i
<i>b<u>a</u>t</i>	æ
<i>b<u>o</u>t</i>	ɔ
<i>b<u>oa</u>t</i>	oʊ
<i>b<u>i</u>te</i>	ai
<i>b<u>oo</u>t</i>	u
<i>b<u>u</u>tt</i>	ʌ
<i>b<u>oo</u>k</i>	ʊ
<i>b<u>a</u>th</i>	ɑ

- How you pronounce some of these might be different from what is indicated! There are lots of differences in vowel pronunciations.
- Some vowels consist of two vowels joined together, like *ei* or *ai*! We call these **diphthongs**.

Design choice 3:

What do you want your syllables to look like?

- ▶ Languages put consonants and vowels together to form **syllables**. The most common syllable is **CV** (Consonant Vowel) and **V** (Vowel).

In fact, some languages only allow CV and V syllables! Fijian is an example:

(1) *iko kana apolo*
i-ko ka-na a-po-lo
you eat apple
'You eat apples.'

- ▶ Many languages also allow **CVC** or **VC** syllables, as in words like *bat* or *it*.
- ▶ English allows much more complex syllables. You can make your syllables more complicated **at the start**:

Syllable type	Example
CCV	<i>bro</i>
CCVV	<i>bray</i>
CCCVV	<i>stray</i>
CCVC	<i>brat</i>
CCVC	<i>strap</i>

- ▶ And you can make them more complicated **at the end**:

Syllable type	Example
CVCC	<i>rust</i>
CVCCC	<i>lengths</i>

– The word *lengths* ends in **three** consonants, *ng* (ŋ), *th* (θ) and *s*.

- ▶ Some examples of really complicated syllables in English are *strengths*, CCCVCCC, and *sixths*, CVCCCC (in English spelling, *x* represents two consonants, *k* and *s*).

Note: This is about sounds rather than spellings (e.g. *lengths* = 7 letters but 5 sounds).

Activity 1 — Picking sounds

1. Circle what you want for your language:

8–12 consonants

12–15 consonants

over 15 consonants

Write down some of your consonants:

2. Circle what you want for your language:

3–5 vowels

5–10 vowels

Write down some of your vowels:

3. What kind of syllables do you want for your language?

Simple syllables

Complex starts

Complex ends

Both

Write down some possible syllables:

Building syllables for _____

Using the choices you made on the last page, create some possible syllables of your language. Create at least 15!

Syllable type: _____

Syllable type: _____

Syllable type: _____

Part 2: Building words

Now that you have sounds, you need to put them together to form **words**.

Design choice 1:

How long do you want your words to be?

- ▶ Some languages make use of really long words! Here are some words of Inuit (Canada).

Qallunaatituusuunguviit? 'Do you speak English?'
Tukisivinngaa? 'Do you understand me?'
Ayagciqsugnarqnilruuq. 'He said he would probably go.'
qarisaujattsiavaralaaq 'small good computer'

(To listen to Inuit, look here: <https://youtu.be/iPGAbctSHuY?t=46>)

- ▶ And other languages have **lots of short words**, like Vietnamese:

(2) *Khi toi den nha ban toi, chung toi bat dau lam bai.*
'When I came to my friend's house, we began to do lessons.'
(3) *Co ay co gap ai do khong?*
'Did she meet someone?'

- ▶ *How do words in some languages become so long?*

Answer: They consist of multiple **parts**.

(4) *qarisaujat-tsiava-ralaaq*
computer-good-small
'small good computer'

We call parts of words **morphemes**. Some morphemes can never be words by themselves, but must appear with another morpheme. These are called affixes.

- ▶ Your language can be of different types:

- **Vietnamese**

One morpheme per word → Lots of short words, no affixes

- **English**

A few morphemes per words → Decent number of medium-length words, some affixes

- **Inuit**

Lots of morphemes per words → Small number of long words, a lot of affixes

Design choice 2:

Should your language have affixes?

There are a few ways of putting morphemes together!

▷ **Affixes.**

Your language could have affixes. An example of an affix is English *-s*, which is a plural morpheme that you add to nouns:

- (5) *cat*
cat-s

▷ **Independent words.**

In Vietnamese, the plural morpheme is an **independent word**.

- (6) *con gau*
'bear'

- (7) *nhung con gau*
'bears'

▷ **Reduplication.**

Another option you have is **reduplication**. In some languages, you repeat a morpheme instead of having an affix or another word.

In Indonesian, reduplication indicates plural:

- (8) *kucing*
'cat'

- (9) *kucing-kucing*
'cats'

Design choice 3:

How many numbers should your language have?

- ▶ Some languages have **no number at all** on nouns, like Māori:

(10) *ngeru*
'cat/cats'

- ▶ English has one number morpheme, the plural morpheme *-s*. This means English has **two numbers**:

(11) singular: *cat*
plural: *cat-s*

- ▶ You can also have more than two numbers. In Inuit, nouns can be singular, plural, or **dual** (for groups of two!):

(12) *matu*
'a door'

(13) *matu-uk*
'two doors'

(14) *matu-it*
'more than two doors'

- ▶ In Fijian, there is a dual number as well as number for small groups of three to six. This is called **paucal number** and you can see it in (17):

(15) *au*
'I' (singular)

(16) *keirau*
'we' (dual, group of two)

(17) *keitou*
'we' (paucal, group of three to six)

(18) *keda*
'we' (plural, group larger than six)

Design choice 4:

What tenses should your language have?

- ▶ Another type of morpheme is a **tense morpheme**. English has a past tense morpheme *-ed* and a future morpheme *will*:

(19) *I wait.*

(20) *I wait-ed.* (past tense)

(21) *I will wait.* (future tense)

- ▶ Other languages have **no tense at all**, like Mandarin!

(22) *Wo zai Taipei gongzuo.*
I in Taipei work
'I am working in Taipei.'
OR: 'I was working in Taipei.'

- ▶ Other languages have more tenses. For example, Inuit has a **remote past** and a **remote future**:

(23) *Ilisai-lauqsima-junga.*
study-RemotePast-I
'I studied some time ago.'

(24) *Uqaq-laaq-tara.*
talk-RemoteFuture-I
'I will talk some time in the future.'

Activity 2 — Building words

1. Circle what you want for your language:

lots of short words

medium-length words

some long words

Something else:

2. Should your languages have affixes?

independent words

affixes

reduplication

Something else:

3. Which numbers should your language have?

singular

dual

paucal

plural

Something else:

4. Which tenses should your language have?

remote past

past

present

future

remote future

Something else:

Building a wordlist for _____

Using the sounds you picked for Part 1, make some words. (You might want to use some of the syllables you created!)

1 Nouns and number

List 1. Five nouns describing humans or animals:

Noun	Word in your language
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List 2. Nouns with number:

Singular	Plural		
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

2 Verbs and tenses

List 3. Five verbs:

Verb	Word in your language
bite	_____
hit	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List 4. Verbs with tense:

Present	Past	Future		
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

3 Pronouns

	Singular	Dual	Paucal	Plural
1st person	_____	_____	_____	_____
2nd person	_____	_____	_____	_____
3rd person	_____	_____	_____	_____

Part 3: Building sentences

Now that you have words, you need to put them together into **sentences**.

Design choice 1:

What word order do you want?

- ▶ **Verbs** describe an action or state.

Subjects usually describe the individual or item that is doing the action. **Objects** usually describe the individual or item that the action is being done to. (At least in active sentences!)

- ▶ In English, these come in a **fixed order**:

(25) The cat bit the man.
 Subject Verb Object

This is also called **SVO**.

- ▶ Here are some sentences in Klingon:

(26) *jIH qIp SoH*
 me hit you
 ‘You hit me.’

(27) *qet SoH*
 run you
 ‘You run.’

The object comes before the verb and the subject after! This order is called **OVS**.

- ▶ But any order you can think of is possible! Here are some sentences in Fijian (28) and Scottish Gaelic (29):

(28) *edirika na niu ko Eroni*
 crack the coconut Eroni
 ‘Eroni is cracking the coconut.’

(29) *Chunnaic mi an cat.*
 saw I the cat
 ‘I saw the cat.’

Fijian is **VOS**, while Scottish Gaelic is **VSO**.

Design choice 2:

What order do noun and possessor come in?

- ▶ **Nouns** describe individuals and items like *cat*, *book*, and *phone*. Nouns can come with a **possessor**:

(30) *Kim's cat*
Sam's book
Lee's phone

- ▶ **Noun last.**

In English, the possessor comes before the noun. This also tends to be the case in SOV languages.

Here's Korean, which is **SOV** and has **possessors before the noun**:

(31) *Nan Yenghi poasse.*
I Yenghi saw
'I saw Yenghi.'

(32) *Chelsuuy cha.*
Chelsu's **car**
'Chelsu's car.'

- ▶ **Noun first.**

VSO and VOS languages typically have the noun first. Here's an example from Scottish Gaelic (VSO):

(33) *cù Sheumais*
dog James
'James's dog'

Here's an example from Fijian (VOS):

(34) *vale nei Eroni*
house of Eroni
'Eroni's house'

Note: The same options are found with **adjectives**! In some languages, the noun is first, before the adjective. In other, the noun is last, after the adjective. You can make the same choice or a different one!

Design choice 3:

Should your language have prepositions or postpositions?

- ▶ A **preposition** is an element like *in, at, with, to*, and they usually say something about where an action or individual is located:

(35) *The cat bit the man **in** the park.*

- ▶ English has **prepositions**: these come before the location. VOS and VSO languages also have prepositions:

(36) ***air an rathad**
on the road
'on the road' (Scottish Gaelic)*

(37) ***mai Viti**
to Fiji
'to Fiji' (Fijian)*

- ▶ SOV languages like Korean usually have **postpositions**: these come after the location:

(38) ***hakkyo- eyse**
school- **at**
'at school' (Korean)*

Design choice 4:

Should your language have determiners?

- ▶ **Determiners** are items like *the* and *a*, which tell you whether the noun refers to an individual or item that is unique and/or known to both of us.

If I talk about *the woman* or *the man*, we must both know who I have in mind! This is not the case if I say *a woman* or *a man*.

- ▶ As an exercise, go through this text and strike out all the determiners:

(39) *The monster ran through the forest after a man and then the monster speared the man with his claw so that he could roast him in a fire and eat him.*

Read the text out loud. Can you still understand it?

- ▶ Lots of languages don't make use of determiners at all. Thai, for example, does not use a determiner:

(40) *chan hen nuu.*
I see **rat**
'I saw the/a rat.' (Thai)

Design choice 5:

Does your language have case?

- ▶ Lots of languages make use of **case**, a morpheme on a noun that indicates that it is a subject or object.
- ▶ English has **nominative** (for subjects) and accusative (for objects), which are indicated by different forms of pronouns:

(41) *He saw her.*

(42) *She saw him.*

There is also a **genitive** for possessors:

(43) *his book*

(44) *my friend*

- ▶ In many other languages, case is expressed by an **affix**. In Greek, for example, you have a nominative suffix and an accusative one:

(45) *O andr-as vlepi to skil-o.*
the man-**nom** sees the dog-**acc**
'The man sees the dog.' (Greek)

(46) *O skil-os vlepi ton andr-a.*
the dog-**nom** sees the man-**acc**
'The dog sees the man.'

- ▶ Some languages have **no case at all**, not even on pronouns, like Mandarin:

(47) *Zhangsan xihuan ni.*
Zhangsan like you
'Zhangsan likes you.'

(48) *Ni xihuan Zhangsan.*
you like Zhangsan
'You like Zhangsan.'

Activity 3 — Building sentences

1. What word order do you want for your language?

2. Circle what you want for your language:

noun-possessor

possessor-noun

Something else:

3. Circle what you want for your language:

prepositions

postpositions

Something else:

4. Circle what you want for your language:

determiners

no determiners

If determiners, what are your forms for *the* and *a*?

Using your wordlist, write a sentence that contains a subject, verb, and object:

Put your sentence in a different tense:

5. Circle what you want for your language:

case

no case

<p><u>If case, which ones:</u></p>

Building sentences for _____

Using the nouns and verbs you created in Part 2, write down five sentences in your language that consist of a subject, verb, and object.

- ▶ Remember to put the subject and object in the right order.
- ▶ For the subject and object, remember the choices you made about number, determiners, and case.
- ▶ For the verb, remember the choice you made about tense.

1. Sentence: _____

Word-by-word:

Translation:

2. Sentence: _____

Word-by-word:

Translation:

3. Sentence: _____

Word-by-word:

Translation:

4. Sentence: _____

Word-by-word:

Translation:

5. Sentence: _____

Word-by-word:

Translation:

What now?

The material collected here gives you a good start in creating your own language, but there is lots more you can do. Here are some suggestions:

- Design a script!
- Write a short song or poem in your language
- Try translating a text you like into your own language
- Create a small dictionary (200 words)
- Go read about a constructed language you've heard about (like Dothraki or Parseltongue) for some inspiration

Feel free to get in touch with us for more ideas!