

Fiat Lingua

Title: Trompe l'Œil Conlanging—Or How to Fake Depth in a Conlang

Author: Sylvia Sotomayor

MS Date: 07-05-2019

FL Date: 11-01-2019

FL Number: FL-000062-00

Citation: Sotomayor, Sylvia. 2019. "Trompe l'Œil Conlanging—Or How to Fake Depth in a Conlang." FL-000062-00, *Fiat Lingua*, <<http://fiatlingua.org>>. Web. 01 November 2019.

Copyright: © 2019 Sylvia Sotomayor. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Trompe l'Œil Conlanging

Or How to Fake Depth in a Conlang

Sylvia Sotomayor

As everyone no doubt knows, the “best” way to make a naturalistic conlang is to create a proto-language and then age it forward along with all the cultural and technical innovations that the speakers might experience. Yeah. I don't have time for that. It took me 20-30 years to create Kēlen and 7 years to create Kenda Soro. Even taking less than 5 years for a fully worked out proto-language, it would take much too long to develop a daughter language. So, here are a few short-cuts, a few ways of creating the illusion of depth, in no particular order.

1. Save your drafts

Even if you end up creating something relatively ugly or hopeless, there has to be something you like. Keep that. Set it aside if necessary and come back to it later. This goes for vocabulary, sets of vocabulary, partial paradigms, grammar, anything.

2. Remember that everything comes from something

Grammar generally comes from ancestral vocabulary that has been cliticized, affixed, worn away, etc. And, before the ancestral vocabulary was grammaticized, there were probably multiple ways to express the same or a similar thing. So those bits and pieces of an earlier draft or project that you liked, see if they work as remnants of an older pattern or as borrowings.

Also, rather than do what I sometimes do and create new particles to mark new bits of syntax, see if you can't use an existing construction, or part of an existing construction to convey the same idea. Read up on grammaticalization for ideas!

3. There are always exceptions

And these generally come from multiple patterns in the ancestor language, from borrowings from other languages—from all sorts of places. This is where you can take something from a previous draft and say it applies to this subset of words or to this construction in this environment. Creating non-productive patterns for parts of the grammar is a quick way to add depth. Have some words from a previous draft that you really like but that don't fit the phonology of the language? Make them

borrowings. If English can borrow pronouns, your conlang can borrow these words, whatever they are.

Irregular forms are generally much older words that have everyday use or very recent borrowings that haven't completely assimilated into the language yet. So if all your adjectives match the noun in person and number, there is probably a small class like quantifiers maybe or some of the core adjectives that are either invariant or are otherwise irregular. Latin does this by having some adjectives come before the noun (good and bad and some adjectives expressing quantity) and the rest generally follow the noun. Of course, in Latin, you can also put the noun and its adjective at opposite ends of the clause because Latin is perverse like that. But even languages with stricter word order might vary. Some of this variation is due to frequency of use. Some is created by remnants of a more productive system that have now disappeared.

4. Create overlapping patterns

If you can't decide between two different ways to express a case or some other grammaticized usage, use both! One way might be currently productive and the other might be an older usage.

It is common enough for subclasses of some part of speech to have a different pattern of usage or inflection or syntax than the main class. Again, these can be older words with everyday usage, leftovers of a separate class, sets of words borrowed en masse, specialized vocabulary, etc. A language that is strongly prepositional can have a few postpositions, and vice versa. Even English, strongly prepositional, has the postposition 'ago'. And some words will provisionally belong to both classes, like 'through' in 'the whole day through'. So think of the various patterns and systems in your language as liquid layers, ebbing, flowing, overlapping, and so on until in some parts of the language, only remnants of a previous pattern exist.

5. Mess up your systems

Systems don't come into being fully formed like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. It's nice to have a lovely tense system, with more than three tenses, all marked as monosyllabic suffixes on the verb (I do this all the time), but it is far more common in natlangs to have some parts of the tense system marked differently from the others. And the aspect system, the evidentiality system, the person and number systems—any system, really, because these systems evolve as distinctions come to be made. And as they evolve, they coopt different existing words or patterns for the different parts of the system at different periods in the life of the language.

6. *Create overlapping vocabulary*

Have you ever created a new word in your conlang only to find you already had a word for that concept? I do it all the time. It's actually a plus! In natlangs, specific words go in and out of fashion, and some words will, at any given point in time for a particular population of speakers, exist only in specific phrases, or in specialized vocabulary. Specialized vocabulary doesn't have to be jargon specific to a profession. It can belong to any group of people that wants for whatever reason to speak a little differently from another group. Think socioeconomic classes, moieties, age cohorts, kin groups—anybody.

Example:

Say you have the word *tæz* 'snow' and for a relay or something you can't find it, so you coin a new word from your words for 'rain' *ræs* and 'white' *ma* > *ræzma*. Later you find your entry *tæz*. Don't despair! This is not a mistake! Just declare one to be poetic! Like so:

Snow 1. *tæz* in common usage: *tæz tæzanal* 'snow falls', 'it's snowing'. 2. *ræzma* in old-fashioned poetic usage, derived from 'rain' *ræs* + 'white' *ma*: *ræzma tæzanal dæt dʒæz* 'the snow falls on the plain'.

7. *It's okay to have one-offs*

These are patterns or vocabulary that only appear once. So an affix that only appears in a single word, a word that appears only in a single idiom, a grammatical construction that only appears with certain vocabulary. These are also the most likely to be forgotten by subsequent generations and second language learners, but in the meantime they exist and hint at depth.

It is okay to have single-word word classes. Some of these will be remnants of older classes or subclasses and some will be innovations that haven't quite caught on yet (or ever).

8. *Unlock the power of metaphor*

Right. That's a whole 'nother paper and John Quijada probably wrote it already.