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Author: Julia Papke, Micha Eisner

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## 'Intlis: a Klingon/English Contact Language

'Intlis is a contact language on the model of an Earth contact vernacular, or creole, with English as the superstrate and lexifier, and Klingon as the substrate language. That is, most of the words of 'Intlis have English etymologies, but organized in ways heavily influenced by Klingon. While many creoles share typological features, creoles are perhaps best defined socio-historically, as Winford (2003) does: as "contact languages that emerged primarily in plantation settings in various European colonies in the world".

Our assumption for this language is that some large population of Klingon speakers was put in a position where they had to learn English, but where they had minimal personal motivation to do so, and minimal access to English language, speakers, and resources. We've never pinned down the in-universe explanation for this (an illegal Federation POW camp? A shipwreck?) but the idea is that there is now a stable, if small, population of speakers of this language, who are nearly all ethnically Klingon but have been out of contact with other Klingons for a few generations. The original model English speakers were Federation officers, and this shows up in a number of the lexical choices: *biq* "prison" from English *brig* (though probably also influenced by Klingon *bighHa*); *qatas* "home" from English *quarters*; *mister* "officer" from the English honorific *mister*; and so forth.

'Intlis was an idea that came out of a few different places. First, we needed a new language project. We developed and teach a class on conlanging at the Ohio State University, and we wanted another language to use as a source for class exercises and translation projects. Second, after reading a lot of student projects that were structurally very similar to English, we were excited by the idea of creating a language that superficially looked like English, but that would be full of pitfalls for a student who didn't read the grammar carefully.

Finally, after we had the good fortune to have Marc Okrand come visit us and speak to our students, we were inspired to engage more deeply with his language. Despite being casual Trekkies at best, we've always been fans of Klingon, and it was fun to get to know it in another way. Hopefully any serious Klingonists reading this will forgive us any naive errors.

### Phonetics and phonology

Because the original speakers of 'Intlis would have been native Klingon speakers, we decided that the phonemic structure should largely pattern like English, but using native Klingon phones to map onto the superstrate.

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Glottal
plosive (unvoiced)	p /p <sup>h</sup> /		t /t <sup>h</sup> /			k /k <sup>h</sup> /	q /q <sup>h</sup> /	ʔ /ʔ/
plosive (voiced)	b /b/		d /d/	D /d̥/		g /g/		
affricate (unvoiced)			tlh /tʰ/	ch /tʃ/			Q /q̥x/	
affricate (voiced)				j /dʒ/				
fricative (unvoiced)	f /f/	th /θ/	s /s/	S /s̺/		H /x/		h /h/
				sh /ʃ/				
fricative (voiced)	v /v/	th /ð/	z /z/	zh /ʒ/		gh /ɣ/		
nasal	m /m/		n /n/			ng /ŋ/		
trill			r /r/					
approximant	w /w/		l /l/		y /j/			
			r /ɹ/					

Klingon

English

Klingon and 'Intlis

Klingon, English, and 'Intlis

This yields a set of 19 consonant phonemes:

/p <sup>h</sup> /	p	/t <sup>h</sup> /	tl	/m/	m
/t <sup>h</sup> /	t	/tʃ/	ch	/n/	n
/q <sup>h</sup> /	q	/dʒ/	j	/ŋ/	ng
/ʔ/	ʔ	/s̺/	s	/r/	r
/b/	b	/x/	h	/w/	w
/d̥/	d	/v/	v	/l/	l
			/j/	j	

Which form a subset of Klingon’s 21 phonemes. Similarly, ‘Intlis maintains Klingon’s 5-vowel system:

/ɪ/	i	/u/	u
/ɛ/	e	/o/	o
/ɑ/		a	

Along with diphthongs *iy*, *ey*, *ay*, *aw*, and *oy*.

Note that we are using a transliteration system that is somewhat different than the one typically used for Klingon. This is partly for simplicity’s sake (no need to have *S* when there isn’t also *s*) but also because we assume that ‘Intlis would have started off being written in the Latin alphabet, as Federation Standard is. In fact, to the extent that ‘Intlis was written at all in the early days of its inception, it was likely written with even more typical Federation orthography, such as “got” for *qot*, or “kid” for *qid* (despite both words being pronounced in ‘Intlis with the same initial consonant). In principle, however, there is no reason that ‘Intlis could not be written using the standard Klingon transliteration system, or indeed, using *plqaD*.

### Phonological nativization phenomena

Because the first ‘Intlis speakers were starting from a Klingon phonemic framework, they in general substituted the nearest Klingon equivalents for unfamiliar English sounds. In many cases this is very straightforward— Kl. /d/ for En. /d/, Kl. /x/ for En. /h/, Kl. /r/ for En. /ʃ/. In others, the substitution causes mergers— Kl. /ʂ/ substitutes for both En. /s/ and /ʃ/; Kl. /q/ stands in for both En. /k/ and /g/ (a gap in Klingon’s phonological structure). Klingon has /v/ but not /f/, and both are instantiated in ‘Intlis as /v/.

‘Intlis also in general follows Klingon phonotactics. ‘Intlis allows no consonant clusters in onset position, though English *tr*, *kl*, *gr*, etc. are all instantiated as the affricate /tʃ/ in ‘Intlis. No clusters are allowed in coda position either, including Klingon’s allowed coda clusters *-w*, *-y*, and *-rgh*, which undergo processes of cluster simplification where relevant, as in ‘Intlis *ber* “irritable”, from Klingon *bergh*.

### Example derivations

English *eat* becomes ‘Intlis *iyt*— note that the glottal stop that English speakers produce at the start of words beginning with vowels is recognized as a full consonant by ‘Intlis speakers.

English *brother* becomes ‘Intlis *barader*, with the interdental /ð/ replaced with /d/, and a vowel inserted to break up the disallowed consonant cluster.

Some English derivations are less obvious, as with ‘Intlis *tlitar* “animal”. *tlitar* in fact derives from English *critter*, and the initial cluster has been instantiated as the affricate *tl*.

## The Grammar

The grammar is organized around three core principles. First, the surface material should be mostly English— while there are a few Klingon borrowings, we generally prefer to come up with English etymologies for easily-translated words, reserving Klingon mostly for cultural touchstones like *betleh* “batleth sword” or *qah* “gagh (edible worms)”. Second, though, there must be a clear Klingon substrate influence, visible in both the lexical semantics and the syntax. So, in order to create a new word, we begin by looking up synonyms and near equivalents in both English and Klingon, try to understand how the Klingon concepts are organized, and impose those patterns onto the English surface forms.

For example, consider the kinship terms. Klingon kinship terms generally contain a separable marker for gender (*loD* for male relatives and *be`* for females)— so ours do too, using Starfleet’s terms of address *sir* and *ma’am* as the gender markers. (The near-coincidence of *ma’am* and *mom* reinforces this pattern, so at some point, speakers reanalyzed these two as the same word.)

English	Klingon	‘Intlis	English	Klingon	‘Intlis
man; male	loD	ser man	woman	be`	mam man
father	vav	dad	mother	SoS	mam
brother	loDnl`	ser barader	sister	be`nl`	mam barader
son	puqloD	ser qid	daughter	puqbe`	mam qid

Our third organizational principle is to draw on Creole linguistics as a general field, to make sure ‘Intlis is a convincing Creole as well as a fusion of its two linguistic contributors. This means that ‘Intlis has features that are common in Creoles. For example, it is morphologically isolating, unlike either English or Klingon. We also use reduplication, which is iconic (copying the word to signify “more of something”)— non-native speakers easily seize on such devices to get their meaning across when they don’t know a standard way of doing so. While Klingon has two evidential markers, *-bej* “completely certain” and *-ba`* “obvious”, we indicate these meanings by copying the verb stem, so *valay-valay* means “definitely flies”.

Making ‘Intlis look like a Creole also involves a lot of grammatical leveling. All questions begin with the interrogative marker *`is*. This isn’t how Klingon grammar works, but the distribution of *is* in English questions (“Is she going?”, “What is she doing?” but not “What does she think?”) is complicated and hard to learn. It’s easy to imagine non-native speakers with little incentive to acquire standard English just generalizing the marker across the whole class.

## The Lexicon

Apart from semantic domains like the kinship terms, two other areas stand out in the lexicon. One is the extremely limited inventory of prepositions. Klingon has a fixed inventory of locative morphemes, and creates more complicated modifiers by attaching them to location nouns. For instance, Klingon has a special noun indicating the area above something:

*nagh Dung-Daq*  
rock place.above-LOC  
“above the rock” (Okrand 1985 p31)

In ‘Intlis, we restricted ourselves to three prepositions, *‘in*, *vam* and *var*, with basic etymological meanings “in”, “from”, “for”. As in Klingon, we use a variety of nouns to express spatial relationships, either calqued from Klingon (*‘in nos* “in front of”, where *nos* means “nose; pointed bow of a vehicle; space right in front of something”— modeled on Klingon *logh`ob* “chest [upper part of the torso]; hood or bonnet of a vehicle; the front of something”) or reanalyzed from English prepositions (*‘in `ovar* “across from”, where *‘ovar* means “counterpart”).

Second are a set of verbs with patient-like subjects and agent-like objects. Although we knew we couldn’t use Klingon’s OVS default ordering as the standard order (since even the most casual contact with English would make it clear to learners that it uses SVO), we did want this order to appear here and there in ‘Intlis. English verbs like *burn*, *break* and *boil* offer an opportunity to do this, since they appear in constructions like “The water boiled” (patient-first)— these alternate with agentive constructions like “They boiled the water”, but learners don’t necessarily realize that. The ‘Intlis reflexes of these verbs don’t alternate at all— the patient always comes first, and the agent (if present) is last:

*wadar qam boy* “the water is starting to boil”  
*wadar qam boy wayv yu* “your spouse is starting to boil water”

## The Noun Phrase

Klingon nouns have up to five suffixal modifiers, as in the famous example:

*Qagh-Hom-mey-Hey-Ilj-mo’*  
error-DIM-PL-apparent-2POSS-due.to  
“because of your apparent minor errors” (Okrand 1985, p29)

‘Intlis noun phrases express many of the same distinctions, but with a more English-like surface order. This is another place in the grammar where reduplication is used in an iconic way, in this case to indicate an augmentative meaning (“a big X”)— there is no direct correspondent to the Klingon diminutive. Like Klingon, ‘Intlis has markers that indicate something is not what it seems (*no qayd* “so-called”, *luq* “apparent”) and a system of optional plural markers that distinguish

animacy ('aw, from "all", for animates and *dem*, "them", for inanimates). Unlike Klingon, there are also demonstratives (*ta* "this" and *ta'* "that").

An 'Intlis counterpart to Okrand's example (swapping the missing diminutive for an augmentative) might be:

*var qas dem luq rang-rang yu*  
"because of your apparent major errors" (*rang* < En. *wrong*)

While many of the semantic pieces a Klingon speaker would expect are still there, the syntax has changed—the causal meaning is now expressed by a preposition/noun pair, many of the suffixal elements are now in front of the noun, like English adjectives, and there is no separate system of possessive markers. Both nominal and pronominal possessors just follow the noun, as is already the case for Klingon nominal possessives like *nuH pegg* "the secret of the weapon"—another case of leveling.

### The Verb Phrase

Like the noun phrase, the verb phrase is calqued, piece by piece, from its Klingon equivalent. Creole linguistics has documented some extremely clear-cut cases of this with natural languages. For instance, Haitian Creole has tense/mood/aspect markers whose phonological forms are derived from French, but whose semantics derive from the West African language Fongbe, as in the following examples from Lefevre 1996 showing the correspondence between the French auxiliary *été*, Fongbe anterior marker *kò*, and Creole *te*:

Jean a *été* malade.  
"John has been sick." (French; example 52e)

Sìkà kò dā wǒ  
Cica kò prepare dough  
"Cica had prepared dough." (Fongbe; example 58)

Lè m' rive, Mari te prepare pat.  
When I arrived Mary ANT prepare dough  
"When I arrived Mary had prepared dough." (Haitian Creole; example 4)

A full description of the 'Intlis verb phrase is given in the grammar, so we will give only a few examples here. For instance, the auxiliary *meq* matches the Klingon causative *moH* (the two even sound a little similar!). This is a nice opportunity to introduce some subtle syntactic differences between English and 'Intlis. While *meq* derives from *make*, and behaves a lot like it, it binds more tightly to the verb in the syntax, behaving more like an auxiliary than a separate verb, so the object of the combined phrase follows the main verb:

*meq valay yu* "make you fly", not \**meq yu valay*

And *meq*, like its Klingon counterpart, is a lot more productive than *make*, giving rise to idioms like *meq sar* “cause to know; tell” < En. *sure*.

Also matching Klingon are the paired perfect aspect markers *qot* (volitional) and *hav* (non-volitional), which correspond to Klingon *-ta'* and *-pu'* respectively. These descend from English *got* and *have* in alternations like “We got to eat ice cream” versus “We had to eat dirt”—a subtle difference, but one that Klingon speakers might easily pick up on, since it is so similar to an important grammatical distinction they already have. So, a Klingon pair like:

*luHoHta'* “they have killed him/her (they set out to do so)”

*luHoHpu'* “they have killed him/her (without meaning to)” (see Okrand 1985 p41)

Can be translated as:

*dey qot qiw* ‘iy “they have killed him/her (they set out to do so)”

*dey hav qiw* ‘iy “they have killed him/her (without meaning to)”

## A Short Text

This short story shows off some of the grammatical constructions we have already covered—plus a few more. You might notice the tendency for locative expressions to appear first, rather than last, in the sentence (*‘in rod... qeylis qot qo*), and the prenominal relative clause (*‘e por ‘in tap hud rivur*), both of which derive from Klingon rather than English principles of information structure. The stack of verbs *meq qam tun* “made it begin to turn (into)” combines the causative and inchoative; this is a lexically specific idiom to express “transform” or “manufacture”.

*‘In rod hud Qeylis qot qo, ‘in rodrod ‘in Tli’ataq vayrhud. Vam tap hed ‘iy chip tad heyr ‘iy ‘ad ‘iy put ‘i’ ‘e por ‘in tap hud rivur lava. Ta heyr qam vayr batten ‘in diyp leyk Lusor ‘iy put ‘i’ ‘atten ‘iy meq qam tun ‘i’ betleh.*

Kahless went into the mountains, all the way to the Kri’stak Volcano. He cut off a lock of his hair and thrust it into the river of molten rock, which poured from the summit. The hair began to burn, but then he plunged it into the Lake of Lusor and twisted it into a sword. (Star Trek: The Next Generation)

*‘in rod hud Qeylis qot qo,*

<i>‘in</i>	<i>rod</i>	<i>hud</i>	<i>Qeylis</i>	<i>qot</i>	<i>qo</i>
LOC	path	mountain	Kahless	PRF.VOL	go



'in rodrod 'in Tli'ataq vayrhud.

'in rod~rod 'in Tli'ataq vayrhud\*  
LOC path~AUG LOC Kri'stak volcano

**Kahless (on purpose) went on the mountain path, on the long path to the Tli'ataq volcano.**

(\*vayrhud is a partial loan from Kl. qulHud "volcano"="fire mountain")

vam tap hed 'iy chip tad heyr 'iy

vam tap hed 'iy chip tad heyr 'iy  
from top head 3SG cut piece hair 3SG

'ad 'iy put 'i' 'e por 'in tap hud rivur lava.

'ad 'iy put 'i' 'e por 'in tap hud rivur lava  
and 3SG put 3SG.INAN REL pour CONT top mountain river lava

**He cut a piece of his hair, and he put it into the river of lava that was pouring from the top of the mountain.**

ta heyr qam vayr batten

ta heyr qam vayr bat-ten  
DEM.PROX hair INCH fire but-then

'in diyp leyk Lusor 'iy put 'i'

'in diyp leyk Lusor 'iy put 'i'  
LOC depths lake Lusor 3SG put 3SG.INAN

'atten 'iy meq qam tun 'i' betleh

'at-ten 'iy meq qam tun 'i' betleh  
and-then 3SG CAUS INCH turn 3SG.INAN sword

**That hair started to be on fire, but then, he put it into the depths of lake Lusor and made it turn into a sword.**

## Conclusion

'Intlis has worked out well for us in the classroom. Students do find the text above relatively easy to translate, but with some slip-ups here and there (especially for words with more than one meaning— *'in* represents an etymological merger between English *in* and *-ing*, and can function as either a locative or a continuous aspect marker). Glossing a text that contains familiar elements arranged in an unfamiliar way seems to help them to understand some of the ways that linguistic variation can go deeper than just one-to-one relexification.

Of course, student eyes on a text also help us to find our own errors! Several of them pointed out a missing pronoun in the first version of the text, to which we could only respond: *Var qas ta wiy hav baras* "We're ashamed of that".

Working on 'Intlis has also deepened our appreciation of the richness and complexity of the Klingon lexicon. Noticing that Klingon *qach* "house" appears in combining forms for buildings as diverse as breweries and hospitals helped us to define 'Intlis terms like *qatas qach* "house" and *qaw qach* "barn". But it also showed us yet again how Okrand found opportunities to show off the Klingon tendency to agglutinate in places we would never have thought to look.

If we have one future goal for 'Intlis, in fact, it is more lexicography. While the grammar isn't completely finished, we think the syntactic broad strokes are there; a lot of the remaining detail of the language will consist of more (basic and specialized) vocabulary and the lexically specific constructions that go along with them. Last year's in-class conlang relay, for example, led to a new optative construction (expressed by combining the conditional and the imperative) and the word *qawad* "coward", clearly an essential for any right-thinking Klingon.

Our complete draft grammar of 'Intlis is available at <https://u.osu.edu/elsner.14/files/2023/08/intlis-grammar.pdf> if you'd like to see more, including some slightly longer texts. Our thanks go out to Marc Okrand and the Klingon community, and to all the Creolists whose work we've drawn on here. *Var qas wiy qan meq siy yu 'Intlis, wiy qam qot hapiy!*