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In Search of a Hero's Conlang

Protophonology: Part I

by

Mavrommatis Spyridon

Introduction

My work as a writer and painter has always been interconnected: sometimes I begin with an image, and words emerge from it; other times a line of writing calls forth a vision on paper.¹ This project is part of a larger work of fiction in which image and narrative evolve together. At first, I approached it visually, using charcoal, pencil, and ink to capture scenes of a mythic world. From these images, words began to unfold, and as the story deepened, it became clear that redemption for the hero could not arrive through survival alone. His escape, his transformation of identity, demanded something deeper: even his language had to change. Language, after all, is never neutral —it betrays who we are and shapes our perspective, our point of view.

The problem of the hero’s language deepens since we know that *The Beowulf* poem never makes clear whether Grendel possessed a tongue of his own. He hears and understands human songs, but his own voice remains unnamed, described only in cries and laments.² I found myself drawn to this silence, empathizing with a creature whose very means of connection was denied to him —subjugated further by the monstrous tyranny of voicelessness. In this continuation, the act of speech itself becomes essential: to alter one’s sounds, to recast one’s words, is to alter the very vision of the world. This project therefore begins at the level of sound, a protophonology that seeks to trace the earliest cries of a new self and a new world.

In this essay, I present the phonological and phonotactic foundations of Melenu, the protolanguage of my fictional world. The focus rests on two interlinked aspects:

Phoneme Classes —the inventory of sounds, grouped by articulatory and functional categories (vowels, plosives, fricatives, nasals, affricates, liquids, clusters), alongside the basic syllable structures they generate.

Word Patterns —the mapping of syllable tiers (S, SS, SSS) onto core word classes, including articles, pronouns, nouns, verbs, and auxiliary constructions, illustrated with examples from the Melenu script.

Although this section primarily concerns phonology and phonotactics, some examples inevitably extend into orthography and morphology where necessary for clarity. These excursions are not meant as a full morphological treatment, but rather as illustrative expansions that help contextualize the phonological patterns.

Subsequent work will expand into **affixation, stress, and spelling conventions**, tracing the gradual enrichment of Melenu from bare sound into a full linguistic system. But here, at the very beginning, we remain closest to the creature's first utterances —sounds becoming words, words becoming patterns, and patterns becoming the first fragile architecture of meaning.

1. Creating Phoneme Classes

In this work, I use the classification framework of VulgarLang³ as a base, rather than following it strictly, to analyze and construct the conlang of Melenu /'Melenu/.

The phonemes are grouped into classes separated in terms of their articulatory features and phonological behavior, forming categories such as vowels, plosives, fricatives, nasals, affricates, liquids and clusters.⁴

Additionally, I define S as the set of permitted syllable structures, which helps map the phonotactic constraints of the language.

1.1. Phoneme Classes

Vowels	V = a, e, i, o, u
Plosives	P = b, p, t, d, k, g,
Fricatives	F = f, v, θ, ð, s, z, ʃ, ʒ, ɣ, x, h
Nasals	N = m, n, ɳ
Affricates	A = tʃ, dʒ
Liquids	L = r, l
Cluster	C = ks
Syllable Structures	S = V, CV, CCV

Some good examples of Melenu syllables are the following⁵:

- V and CV → orothoga 
- **IPA:** /o'roθoga/
- **Latinization:** orothoga (o = [o], as in English *more* —but without the final *r*;
θ = [θ], as in English *thing*)
- **Syllables:** o.ro.tho.ga

- **Meleno Script:** የዕድገት
- **Gloss:** mountain; god's residence
- **Translation:** "mountain" OR "a sacred mountain" OR "god's refuge" OR "god's dwelling"
- CCV → travaho 
- **IPA:** /'travaho/
- **Latinization:** travaho (a = [a], as in English father; o = [o], as in English more —but without the final r; h = [x], a voiceless velar fricative, a sound not common in English)
- **Syllables:** tra.va.ho
- **Meleno Script:** ትዕረዕወ
- **Gloss:** run; suffer
- **Translation:** "to run OR to suffer OR to be troubled"

2. Creating Phonotactics: Word Patterns

In this section, keeping in mind that the language belongs to the hero of my novel —who, before his gradual existential transformation, was unable even to speak⁶, I set out the rules of word formation based on the number and sequence of syllabic structures previously established. Within this tiered patterning, a word may consist of one (S), two (SS), or at most three (SSS) syllabic units.

Each core word class is mapped to a specific structural pattern: articles and auxiliary verbs are simple and consist of a single syllable (S), pronouns slightly more complex with two (SS), while nouns and verbs extend to three syllabic units (SSS).

2.1. Word Patterns

Pattern Tiering	S, SS, SSS
Article Pattern	Article, Auxiliary Verbs = S
Pronoun Pattern	Pronoun = SS, SSS (extended forms with auxiliaries)
Noun Pattern	Noun = SSS,
Verb Pattern	Verb = SSS,

I do not define separate patterns for adjectives, adverbs, or other derived forms here, since these derive structurally and phonotactically from the core classes, particularly nouns and verbs. For instance, an adjective may share a base with a noun or be marked by a consistent transformation rule within the phonotactic framework. In this way, I maintain a streamlined system where derivation builds upon the core pattern classes, rather than requiring an independent phonotactic tier.

A good example of words in Melenu that follow this pattern are the following:

- $S \rightarrow le$ 

 - **IPA:** /le/
 - **Latinization:** le (e = [e], a close-mid front vowel, similar to English *they* but shorter and without the final glide)
 - **Syllables:** le
 - **Melenu Script:** le
 - **Gloss:** DEF
 - **Translation:** "the"

- $S \rightarrow na$ 

 - **IPA:** /na/
 - **Latinization:** na (a = [a], as in English *father*)
 - **Syllables:** na
 - **Melenu Script:** nə
 - **Gloss:** AUX
 - **Translation:** *am / is / are*

- $SS \rightarrow Rime$ 

 - **IPA:** /'Rime/
 - **Latinization:** Rime (i = [i], as in "machine")
 - **Syllables:** Ri.me
 - **Melenu Script:** ŋeə
 - **Gloss:** 1SG
 - **Translation:** "I" OR "me"

- $SSS \rightarrow shahasa$ 

 - **IPA:** /'ʃahasa/

- **Latinization:** shahasa (a = [a], as in English father)
- **Syllables:** sha.ha.sa
- **Melenu Script:** ʃðəðʃð
- **Gloss:** night; peace; silence
- **Translation:** "night" OR "darkness" OR "peace" OR "tranquility" OR "silence"

Once the phoneme classes and syllabic tiers are in place, the language reveals its flexibility most clearly in the extended pronoun forms. While the core system limits words to one (S), two (SS), or three (SSS) syllabic units, auxiliaries allow pronouns to expand beyond their base tiering, producing forms that carry additional nuance. Consider the examples below:

- Rime na le shahasa 

 - **Melenu Script:** ʃʃeəə ʃð ʃe ʃðəðʃð⁷
 - **IPA:** /'Rime na le 'sahasa/
 - **English Glossing:** 1SG AUX DEF night
 - **English Translation:** The darkness it's me.

- Rimena le shahasa 

 - **Melenu Script:** ʃʃeəəʃð ʃe ʃðəðʃð
 - **IPA:** /'Rimena le 'sahasa/
 - **English Glossing:** 1SG+AUX DEF night
 - **English Translation:** I am the darkness.

In this system, the distinction between the two sentences lies not in word order or intonation, but in morphology. When the auxiliary **na** remains separate (*Rime na*), the focus falls on the pronoun — the subject “I” is foregrounded, and the predicate is backgrounded. By contrast, when the auxiliary fuses with the pronoun (*Rimena*), the subject recedes; the predicate becomes the center of meaning.

Endnotes

¹ Spyridon Mav. Grendel – Literary Illustrations: Prose: Grendel’s Return, Identity, The Pouch of Thanks. Pinterest. Accessed August 23, 2025. <https://gr.pinterest.com/SpyridonMav/>.

² The Old English poem does not grant Grendel a voice of his own: he is portrayed as brutish, barbaric, and lacking the ability to command language or communicate effectively with others—sometimes even with his own mother. Later adaptations, such as John Gardner’s *Grendel* (1971), deliberately humanize him by endowing him with speech and introspection, thus underscoring the silence of the original. See: Owens, Christina. *Shapeshifter and Chameleon: Grendel as an Indicator of Cultural Fears and Anxieties*. Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis, Texas A&M University, 2016.

³ VulgarLang. *Vulgar – Language Generator*. Accessed August 22, 2025. <https://www.vulgarlang.com>. Before attempting to construct a language using the conlang engine, it is advisable to read the guide to gain a clearer understanding of the underlying structure of a constructed language.

⁴ International Phonetic Association. *Full IPA Chart*. Accessed August 22, 2025. <https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/full-ipa-chart>. This link will help in understanding the phonemes and the distinctions between them.

⁵ The gloss provides the core or technical meanings of a word, separated by semicolons, without indicating contextual preference. The translation then expands on these meanings and shows how the word may be interpreted in context. The use of OR indicates semantic differentiation (either subtle nuances, e.g. “mountain” OR “sacred mountain”, or distinct meanings, e.g. “mountain” OR “god’s dwelling”).

In practice, lexical items are rendered with their semantic equivalents (e.g. “night,” “peace”), while grammatical elements are marked with conventional abbreviations (e.g. 1SG, AUX, DEF). In full sentences, both appear together, reflecting the dual lexical and grammatical structure of the utterance. Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology & University of Leipzig. Conventions for Interlinear Morpheme-by-Morpheme Glosses. Revised February 2008, last updated May 31, 2015.

⁶ Biblaridion. *How to Make a Language – Part 1: Introduction*. YouTube video. Accessed August 22, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHK1gO2Mh68>. This video, along with the rest of the series, illustrates why it is both natural and wise to consider for whom you are building a language. As noted in the Introduction, this language is created for a hero who begins as the pathetic, monstrous creature known from the Beowulf saga as Grendel.

⁷ According to the mythos of the language, the earliest inscriptions were carved vertically on tree trunks. The hero, seeking to leave fragments of thought, would begin where the bark was thick enough to contain a letter, carving his sentence downward. Writing vertically, he rarely reached a natural end-point and thus never marked a full stop. What mattered was not closure, but that the meaning itself found room on the living wood. Later, when writing on paper, he recalled this practice: instead of a closing dot, he placed a mark at the beginning, with a downward line, as if memory itself were dripping from the trunk. In this way, the sentence is less a closed unit of time and more an utterance that endures until replaced.