

# Learning Klingon: What a Barely-Human Grammar Can Teach Us about Language Acquisition

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In this seminar, I discuss the history of Klingon; what makes it a barely-natural language; socio-linguistics of its learners; and, the potential role of Klingon and other constructed languages in language acquisition testing.

Klingon was invented by linguist, Dr. Marc Okrand in the 1980s to give substance to the alien antagonists in *Star Trek III*. Since then, thousands of people have tried learning this barely-human language, which uses some of the typologically rarest elements of phonology ([tʰ] and [qχ]), morphology (simultaneous subject and object tracking on the verb), and syntax (OVS word order).

One might think that a language that employs stress shift rules not based on phonetic plausibility or phonological structure (Windsor & Stewart 2017), or that allows the construction of the three-word sentence in (1) according to its templatic design would spell game-over for would-be learners.

(1) *nobwI'a'pu'qoqvam'e'*

nob-wI'-a'-pu'-qoq-vam-'e'

give-NMLZR-AUG-PL-so.called-PROX-TOP

*nuHegh'eghrupqa'moHlaHbe'law'II'neS*

nu-Hegh-'egh-rup-qa'-moH-laH-be'-law'-II'-neS

3.PL>1.PL-die-self-prepare-resume-cause-able-NEG-seemingly-progress-HON

*SeH'eghtaHghach'a'na'chajmo'*

SeH-'egh-taH-ghach-'a'-na'-chaj-mo'

control-self-PROG-NMLZR-AUG-POSS-due.to

'The so-called great benefactors [are] seemingly unable to cause us to prepare to resume honourable suicide, which was already in progress, due to their definite self-control'

(David Baron)

However, the grammar of this constructed language can successfully be acquired (Windsor & Stewart 2017) due to the fact that the input is regular, well-attested, and does not rely on complex mental structures (*cf.* Peperkamp & Dupoux 2007; Moreton & Pater 2012); this is despite analysis that it does not supply a substantive bias (Carpenter 2005, 2006, 2010; Moreton & Pater 2012) or a Domain Generalization Bias (Zymet 2018) to assist in acquisition. Further, according to Moreton & Pater (2012), because of their purposeful and rule-based construction, constructed languages may prove ideal for L2 acquisition testing due to their ability to isolate a particular variable that the researcher is interested in; evidence to support this claim is offered in this presentation from a Klingon stress acquisition study (Windsor & Stewart 2017).

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