

From the Conlang mailing list of September 1992

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Subject: Plan B, and beyond!

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Searching for a snail-mail address I had mislaid, I had to revive my mailbox and wade through 993 messages. As I did, I chanced upon several which I must have missed. One was telling us about the availability of a certain "Plan B" at hebrew.cc.columbia.edu. 'Twas like waving a red rag at a frog (a bullfrog) and I snapped at the bait merrily.

I read Plan B on the taxi ride to the city on Telecom business which, according to Telecom, you have no business knowing about. But Plan B is no corporate secret, so I want to tell about Plan B "Design and Implementation of a Near-Optimal Loglan Syntax". Be warned: I'm about to take the mickey out of Plan B from Hebrew Space. And why shouldn't I? It reads as if the author was having us on. So it's only a mickey for a minnie [see footnote 1]. Nevertheless, Plan B gave me a great idea for the perfect conlang. Just bear with me as I unveil before your amazed eyes the arcane mysteries of Plan B, you will be fully rewarded in the end.

The Plan-B language -- I'll call it Bee for short -- Bee, then, has 16 er... phonemes, because sixteen is a power of two, which makes it computationally desirable. Each phoneme has two allophones, one of which is a vowel, or a diphthong, or the same preceded by "r", the other a consonant. I say: jolly good idea! Indeed, it's like the author says: "By providing both a vowel and a consonant pronunciation for each letter, and using them alternately, we can pronounce arbitrary strings of letters without difficulty". Brilliant. And I, poor sod, who thought a strict CV(V) language would do it!

For instance:

English: "I like her driving my car"

Bee: "G-l tk-s ck-l mg-n g-n cc-l"

IPA: [g-rE ti:-s eik-rE mai-n ai-n eiS-rE] (S = esh, E = epsilon)

This is terrific, for it means that each word has exactly two allomorphs, depending on how many er... phonemes precede it in the sentence. "Ck" for instance, is either [eik] or [Si], e.g.

English: "She likes me"

Bee: "Ck-l tk-n g-l"

IPA: [Si-l ruk-ri g-rE]

The unambiguous segmentation of the spoken chain into its discrete words, implemented oh! so very messily in Lojban, is implemented Huffman-style in Bee. And I, poor sod, who thought the first vowel of a word could be used to tell how many syllables it had!

Let us now turn to the grammar of the language. It makes do with an unlimited number of ... er... case-markers, of which you have already encountered three: -l, -n, and -s. -l has highest precedence, -n second highest, -s third. Armed the vorpall sword of that knowledge, you should be able to disentangle the Gordian knot of the two sentences above in even less time flat than Alexander.

No? Well, perhaps two more sentences would help:

I drive the car
G-1 mg-n hb-n cc-1

I can drive a car
G-1 cn-n mg-n b-n cc-1

Ha, ha! I hear you say, why "G1 cnn mgn bn ccl" if "G1 tks ckl mgn ccl"? Shouldn't it rather be "G1 cns mgn bn ccl"? I agree with you. It's probably a typing mistake: "s" and "n" are rather close together on a keyboard. However:

I will drive my car to you
G-1 ml-n mg-n g-n cc-1 th-n j-1

So, clearly, it wasn't a typing mistake. Now where have I put that vorpal sword again?

In conclusion, the author sums up the advantages of such a language. I cannot resist the pleasure of quoting ckl:

Compared to existing loglans, [Bee]

- . Is much simpler.
- . Potentially allows for mechanical recognition of continuous speech.
- . Is suited to laboratory studies of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.
- . Possesses a certain elegance. (Eat your hearts out, Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Pierre Balmain and sundry!)

Well, folks, allow me to present my own loglan, beyond Bee. So I'll call it Cee.

Cee is written in an alphabet of 26 letters: a, b, c, d, e, f... I'll leave you to guess at the rest. Those letters are pronounced respectively bi, ba, sha, da, fi, fa... I'll leave you guess at the rest. That leaves us quite a few handfuls of syllables out of which we select:

bo as first-order precedence whatever, which we write 1
sho as second-order precedence ditto, which we write 2
do as third-order of the ilk, which we write 3
... I'll leave you to guess at the rest.

And also:

bu which we write or
shu which we write .

Now look:

English: I drive the car.
Bee: G-1 mg-n hb-n cc-1
Cee: Me-1 drive-2 the-2 car-1.

(Hyphens have been inserted only for your convenience, o, gentle readers!)

English: I can drive a car.
Bee: G-1 cn-n mg-n b-n cc-1
Cee: Me-1 can-2 drive-2 a-2 car-1.

I'll leave it to you to work out the pronunciation of those two Cee

sentences. Just note how that little syllable, bu (spelt), neatly and *elegantly* solves the problem of recognizing morpheme boundaries. Cee, admittedly, is more verbose than Bee, but I'm working on it. Now where is my copy of Dutton's Speedwords?

Footnote(s)

[Note 1] Why "minnie"? Well, we all know who Mickey and Minnie Mouse are, don't we? And what sex they are. Yes? So, it's... twit for twat!