Attitudes towards conlangs and natlangs - a comparison

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Two studies

Online questionnaire survey posted through conlang mailing list
  Sound systems of conlangs
  Use of sound symbolism

Experiment on language attitudes
  Evaluations of conlangs and natlangs
Creating conlang sound systems

- Ease of pronunciation
- Aesthetics/beauty
- Realism/naturalism
- Linguistic theory
- Other languages
- Sound symbolism
Name your fictional character

1. Atlan
2. Ilahja
3. Erosan
4. Rrul’ghargop
5. Gorx

(cf. Elsen 2008: p. 97)
Sound symbolism: hypothesised systematic relationship between sound and meaning

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>‘Small’</th>
<th>‘Large’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>teeny, wee, itsy-bitsy</td>
<td>humongous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>chico</td>
<td>gordo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>petit</td>
<td>grand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>/mikros/</td>
<td>/makros/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>/tʃiisai/</td>
<td>/ookii/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples: “Small” vs “big”

Dothraki: 'naqis' 'zhokwa’
Itlani: 'kilikit' 'gidanit’
Moten: 'pleg' 'tuna’
Egeldish: /sɪnɛ/ /gon/
Celestial: 'bexogio' 'gexogio'
(small size relation) (large size relation)
Attitudes towards languages in public debate

Evaluations often reflect common stereotypes or focus on specific sounds

Quick Twitter survey:
‘Ugly language’: German, Dutch, French, Chinese, Arabic, Danish, ...
‘Beautiful languages’: Italian, Spanish, French, Chinese, Japanese ...

→ Conlangs?
Factors contributing to attitudes towards languages

First language(s) of listener
Number of second languages of listener
Level of familiarity with language
Methodology

109 participants (100 data sets used)
24 languages (nine constructed languages)
Rated on 7-point Likert scale
Traits: pleasant, friendly, educated, peaceful/aggressive, familiar/strange, natural/artificial
Optional: Name of language or region
The languages

NATURAL LANGUAGES (NATLANGS)

- English
- French
- Mandarin
- Sherpa
- Finnish
- Tok Pisin
- Hindi
- Welsh
- Arabic
- Russian
- Dutch
- Inupiatun
- Spanish
- Xhosa
- Hawaiian

CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGES (CONLANGS)

- Castithan
- Celestial
- Dothraki
- Egeldish
- Esperanto
- Itlani
- Klingon
- Moten
- Vaior
Methodology

Data collected at World Science Fiction Convention in London in 2014

Diverse and international audience, but no control of, e.g. L1 background, L2 knowledge & proficiency, etc
## Level of familiarity

**Most familiar sounding languages:**
1. English
2. French
3. Spanish
4. Mandarin Chinese
5. Esperanto*

**Least familiar sounding languages:**
1. Hawaiian
2. Inupiatun
3. Dothraki*
4. Xhosa
5. Sherpa
Familiarity in relation to other traits

Least familiar sounding languages:
1. Hawaiian
2. Inupiatun
3. Dothraki*
4. Xhosa
5. Sherpa

Least educated sounding languages:
1. Hawaiian
2. Inupiatun

Dothraki*:
Least pleasant, friendly, peaceful, natural
Familiarity in relation to other traits

Most familiar sounding languages:
1. English
2. French
3. Spanish
4. Mandarin Chinese
5. Esperanto*

Pleasant:
- English
- French
- Mandarin Chinese

Educated:
- French
- Spanish

Natural:
- English
- French
- Spanish
- Mandarin Chinese

Friendly & peaceful:
- English
- Mandarin Chinese
Other traits

Least natural sounding languages:
1. Klingon*
2. Dothraki*
3. Egeldish*
4. Moten*
5. Celestial*

Between 3 to 4 conlangs were also among the bottom 5 of the following traits:
- Pleasant
- Friendly
- Peaceful
Influence of L1

L1 categories:
- L1 English only (n=68)
- L1 English and another language (bi-/multilingual) (n=6)
- L1 not English (n=26)

Significant only for selected languages and on some traits
No specific pattern for languages or traits
Influence of L2 knowledge

L2 categories
No L2s (n=4)
1-3 L2s (n=38)
4-9 L2s (n=52)
10 or more L2s (n=6)

Significant for a number of languages on a number of traits
General tendency: The groups with more L2 knowledge tend to evaluate the languages more favourably.
Problems

Groups were unbalanced
Unknown level of proficiency in L2
Information on language/region was optional
Each language heard only once
  influence of speech sample, speaker, recording
Thank you

The end.
Thank you

**Moten:** davi|zo  
**Egeldish:** nislankatɛ  
**Itlani:** Sonyaru

**Dothraki:** san athchomari (th = [θ]; ch = [tʃ]; "much respect"; the writers decided Dothraki wouldn’t have a word for "thank you")

**Celestial:** ianita ua (exact meaning: good emotion communication [verb perfective present tense]—2d person accusative)
References & bibliography


