

Towards a Speculative Approach of Language Creation

Yannick Allen-Vuillet

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By: Yannick Allen-Vuillet

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

_____ Chair
Dr. Rachel Berger

_____ Principal Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Erin Manning

_____ Examiner
Pr. Kelly Jazvac

_____ Examiner
Dr. Nathan Sanders

Approved by _____
Dr. Rachel Berger, Graduate Program Director

2021 _____
Dr. Annie Guérin, Dean of Fine Arts

Abstract

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Towards a Speculative Approach of Language Creation is a research-creation project involved in experimenting with practices of conlang as tool for speculating on how language can move differently. Looking at the field of constructed languages, its history and current practices, I establish how its alignment with the methods of scientific linguistics significantly limits the creative potential of sign-body encounters. By going beyond the set of parameters framing what a natural language should be and what characterize a valid syntactic enunciation, I question the enforcement of rigorous method and reproducible patterns as premises for valuable practices. Building on this perspective shift in language's founding principles, this encounter between conlang and philosophy is further extended into the field of art. A remodelling of the theoretical framework of the artistic is necessary to open conlanging activities to a plastic treatment of language. This reorganisation of what it means to create also demands an alteration of key notions such object, time and participation. True to an approach on research-creation inherited from process philosophy, I use this reconfiguration of the domains of language construction and art to launch a series of plastic experimentations. These investigations are presented in this thesis as an inventory of techniques, studying how language reverberates and is reinvented anew across a plurality of materialities.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Project overview	2
Chapters	5
CHAPTER 1	8
A Practice of Language Creation	8
A Very Short History of Conlanging	9
General Methodological procedure for building a constructed language	13
Natlang and Naturalism	19
Pragmatics in linguistics	22
Language and Pragmatics in Deleuze and Guattari	26
CHAPTER TWO	34
Art and Processes	34
Conlanging as Art	35
The Art Conundrum	38
Object	39
Time	41
Participation	43
Techniques and Technicity	45
Language as Technique	48
Conlanging as Technique	51
CHAPTER THREE	53
A Rigour of Experimentation	53
On Ethics and Aesthetics	55
Tea as practice	58
On Language Creation	60
On Paper Making	63
Notes on Tango	65
On Books	69
Bibliography	71

Introduction

Emerging from many years of academic training in craft and visual arts, I have been taught to appreciate a variety of material modes of knowing, and learned to valorize plastic experimentation as a practice of research in its own right. On the other hand, my contact with writing has mostly been utilitarian, as declarative tool for statements and descriptions. Throughout the last decade, my usage of words and their relation to material practices have been as vector for justification, an explanatory and referential instrument.

Working on this thesis offered an unmatched opportunity to experiment firsthand with writing as research tool for its own sake, with its zones of indeterminacy and intuition. It also satisfied a desire to truly engage with theoretical and philosophical matter, becoming an essential component of a creative project in the making. Writing in my second language was another way to feel the pushes and pulls of the written language, forcing the activation of another type of creative experiment. A bit like working with tools with which you are not fully proficient.

Choosing to enrol in a master's degree in the individualized program allowed me to compose a hybrid landscape where the plastic gesture and the written word are of equivalent importance, without a subjugation of one by the other. Much of the orientations were clarified while writing and making, with a constant back and forth between the books, the studio and the computer. This program offers a shelter in the academic world for the in-between, favouring lines of prospection beyond the practice/theory split. It gives the necessary space to look for the cracks and interstices, and engage rigorously with a research project that wouldn't fit anywhere else. Finally, it allowed a deepening of my understanding in fields of study in which I had little or no formal training. My

decision to move toward research-creation also confirmed a need to take some distance with the configuration of art practices as they are thought in the context of university.

An endeavour in research-creation means readily exploring something that is still blurry, with an end-goal found in the making. It forces proximity with ambiguity and the anxiety of not knowing ahead. It is not a question of finding the right method, but of engaging in the crafting of techniques of relation. It is a movement of thought that taps in the force of the hyphen connecting thinking and making, research and creation. An a-parallel evolution. It emerges with its own rhythm and flow, often inconstant and unpredictable. It is the ideal field of encounter for disparate practices, for a gesture that is inherently transversal. It knows how to craft generative problems, more preoccupied with the questions than with settling for answers. An investigation of how practices produce knowledge.

In this capacity, words are not a crutch to substantiate an artistic practice, nor an intelligible account of materiality transferred into the linguistic. Research-creation doesn't exist to legitimize and intellectualize artistic practice, to make creators eligible to higher academic status. It also implies that the valuation of this kind of project has to be found in the in-act. Applying a pre-established frame of evaluation would mean cancelling the speculative potential of the process before its launch. Value has to be reinvented anew in every instantiation.

Project overview

The genesis of this research project is rooted at the intersection of three fields of study: material practices, process philosophy and the linguistics of constructed languages. I gravitated around these areas of investigation with different levels of intensity throughout the last decade. This

project is an attempt at generating critical questions at the site of their coming together, and investigates what creative propositions could be made for a plastic investment of language construction.

I settled on the term “material practices”, instead of the usual terminologies favoured by visual arts and craft, because I think it emphasizes the processual nature of making, rather than the production of cultural objects. It also positively participates in a dislocation with the academic apparatus of art teaching, such as the paradigm of the Crit and the gallerification of practice. Nonetheless, from my years in the art school emerged clear connective lines of curiosity that are taken up in this research-creation venture. Among them is a fascination for the generation of multiples and their conrescence into larger organized entities. This proclivity for the orchestration of small heterogeneous pieces grew into an interest for language’s patterns and its systematizing qualities. I investigated the relation between words, spaces and bodies, as wells as the impact they have on modes of knowledge creation and transmission. It quickly evolved into a concern for the inherent political attribute of the linguistic phenomena. Beside these conceptual undertakings, my material practice shows a lingering fascination for the technical and for the people spending decades learning and perfecting a skill or a craft.

My attention towards language as structuring apparatus echoes the second area of the project: the linguistic of language construction. As for many researchers involved with constructed languages, or conlangs, my interest crystalized in a childhood of typical geekness, filled with role-playing games, choose-your-own-adventure books and fantastic worlds. From this background I keep a fascination for the boundless intricacy of constructed worlds and for the systems of logical experience designed for fictional characters to evolve in. I am talking about

thousands of pages of grids, charts and data trying to reproduce the mechanisms of the sensible world into a fictional environment, ruling and machining the felt experience into rolls of dice.

The elaborateness characteristic to the realm of fantastic games and literature can also be found in projects of creative linguistics. Conlanging, as a fully autonomous creative practice with its own sense of aesthetic and set of values, also shows this inclination for calquing the mechanisms of the “real-world” in its process. The contemporary instantiations of the art of language creation come with a quest to reproduce faithfully the structures of language, searching for a more realistic and natural feel in the fictional experience. This tendency to valorize the creation of coherent and theoretically rigorous linguistic systems, which prevails in the recent proliferation of constructed languages, is reinforced by an ensemble of methodologies and didactic material. The rapidly growing field recently found a foothold in academia, as a growing number of publications and studies have been published on the subject. This growth in theoretical baggage allows a rigorous questioning and identification of the conceptual tendencies propelling researches in language creation.

What defines the bounds of the natural and what is at stake when trying to replicate the mechanisms of “real-world” language are among the central lines of investigation in this thesis. Building on this question, I pragmatically investigate how the activity of language construction could operate with a different set of premises than the ones forwarded by its current methodologies. This is where the tools of process philosophy, my third field of research, become essential. First, by highlighting the political implications of the theoretical background of conlang and showing the limits its normative power imposes on the creative potential of language. Then,

as an ensemble of alternative perspectives on what a language could be and by isolating the variables that could activate its creative potential.

In this thesis, philosophy also takes on the role of a creative practice, as an apparatus for speculating towards different modes of experiencing and living. It forces a reorganization of what making means, and leads a movement into thinking-making that is always ecological and collective at its core. It reclaims value and reconfigures the focus of creation from production towards practice. I will attempt at creating passages across the theoretical conflict opposing the building blocks of language creation and process philosophy, something that can only be accomplished in the making. I will enjoy the mutual complication of these two fields and turn it into a research-creation practice, taking language creation toward speculation and experimentation.

Chapters

The first chapter aims at politicizing the practice of language creation. I do so by staging a theoretical debate around the question of pragmatics, opposing scientific linguistics and the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari. First, a general introduction to the field of language creation is given, presenting the important milestones and figures of its history, as well as an overview of the methodological procedures to create a fictional language. Then, the chapter continues with an outline of several key concepts in the broad theoretical landscape of conlang, such as the notions of natlang and naturalism. The presentation of these concepts helps illustrate how the current methods for language creation are in direct alignment with the field of scientific linguistics. To operate a shift of perspective, I introduce Deleuze and Guattari's alternative theory of language. Their novel conception of the linguistic emerges from a more global philosophy of

expression, in which the role of pragmatics is completely redefined. This reconceptualization is of crucial importance, because it clarifies the political implications of upholding any linguistic model and indicates the ethical consequences of its elevation as natural pattern.

The second chapter deals with the question of art. In a recent book on the production of constructed languages and its usage as pedagogical tool, the delicate problem of art has been brought up. The famous conlanger David J. Peterson wrote a complete chapter on this theme, trying to justify the inclusion of language construction into the vast and shifting umbrella term *art*. His argument is also built to support institutional legitimization and reassert the seriousness of the activity. Peterson's claim is substantiated by the presentation of a rigorous method, elaborated in order to assure a consistency of quality and effort in the production of fictional languages. After surveying the details of Peterson's account of art as method, the rest of the second chapter is dedicated to the presentation of an alternative understanding of creative practices. Using Manning's account of art as *way* as potent conceptual lever, the debate is taken away from method and the definition of art's boundaries. Instead, it forces a questioning on the concepts of object and time, and how they should be apprehended differently to fully release the speculative potential of art practices. To facilitate this release and generate the ecological movement necessary to encapacitate a creative event, the concept of technique is introduced. The last section of the chapter demonstrates how language and conlang can be put to work as techniques themselves, drawing lines of prospective futurities.

The third and last chapter takes a different road. It has the form of an inventory of practices, playing the role of gateway to the series of material explorations and interventions I conducted in the last two years. This jump into the experimental is justified by an account of the ethical

implications of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of expression. This ethico-aesthetic paradigm asks how does one participate to the stretch of expression in the world. Building on the process philosophical approaches presented in the first two chapters, this last chapter indicates how language and art can be taken into a speculative milieu of practice. The ritual, the gesture, the making of books and paper all participate in a shifting typography of a language in the making, as a series of reverberations across substances. As explained sooner, the written section of this experimental phase doesn't mirror its conrescence into plastic matter. The concepts travel from words to material and back in language again.

CHAPTER 1

A Practice of Language Creation

By contrasting two significantly divergent understandings of the phenomena of language, this chapter inquires into how theoretical constructions might affect a process of language in the making. The first approach will be discussed as “Linguistics” or “scientific linguistic”, encompassing the vast body of knowledge and models usually interested in the search for universals in language. I will show how this standpoint is the one favoured by the current methodologies in constructed languages, or conlang, and highlight the patterns and paths of experimentations favoured by this system. The second approach to be examined originates from the common work of the French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*¹, the authors present a theory of language that underlines the political and ethical implications of any linguistic model, and situate language in an inherently social field.

By highlighting how these two perspectives on language conceptualize the field of pragmatics, I wish to propose an approach to conlanging practices that moves away from the strictures and systematization of their current methodologies². An analysis of pragmatics as framed by scientific linguistics, contrasted with Deleuze and Guattari’s account of language, is relevant to a conversation on constructed languages, because it has strong political implications. By perpetuating the methodological parameters forwarded by normative linguistics, the practice of constructed languages contracts an affiliation and reasserts the political allegiances that come with it.

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

² David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015); Mark Rosenfelder, *The Language Construction Kit* (Chicago: Yonagu Books, 2010).

Before diving into the philosophical and political implications of creating linguistic systems, it is essential to survey the significant landmarks in the history of language construction and its current methods, as the field canonizes them. This quick overview will allow us to better understand how conlanging practices grew into their contemporary form as an autonomous creative activity, and eventually made its way to the academic sphere.

A Very Short History of Conlanging

Playing with language's plasticity is a very ancient practice, stretching its shape and rules for a variety of purposes. Poetry and humour are probably amongst its most ancient forms, with records of verses and jokes traced back more than 4000 years³. It is believed that a certain kind of linguistic manipulation is as old as language itself⁴. Eventually, these tendencies to mess around with words and the fascination for structures and patterns expanded outside the bounds of what is understood in the field of constructed languages as "natural language". These experimentations progressively matured into complex autonomous objects, emerging as the first languages that would be fully controlled by our intentionality and creative power⁵.

Even though it was not coined in this way, proofs of conlanging activity can be traced back to the second century of our era. References to naming languages, a basic system of word creations for specific vocabulary replacement, were found among the writings of the Greek erudite Athenaeus

³ Nathan Sanders, *A Primer on Constructed Languages* (2018), 1.

⁴ Arika Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages: Adventures in Linguistic Creativity, Madness and Genius* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2009), 51.

⁵ Nathan Sanders, *A Primer on Constructed Languages*, 2.

of Naucratis⁶. Artefacts indicating this type of embryonic language creation practices speckle the pages of history across civilizations.

Nonetheless, the *Lingua Ignota*, created by the abbess Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) is commonly credited by the community as being the first genuine conlang. With more than 1000 lexical entries, its own writing system, and the ambiguous religious purpose behind its creation, Hildegard's work is the oldest extensive record we have of a conlang project. The nun was known for her theological scriptures in which she recorded a series of divine visions, contributing to the cryptic nature and myth surrounding the character and her constructed language⁷. However not built upon an independently developed grammar, but rather working as relexification of Latin, *Lingua Ignota*'s body of work hold a special place in the historical narrative of conlanging practice.

Many other canonical experiments were conducted in the following centuries, although the focus and motivation behind the activity of language creation shifted from one epoch to the other. The 17th century gave birth to what is now known as philosophical languages, concerned with the creation of a perfect language, untainted by all the irregularities and imperfections of human's natural languages. John Wilkins' curious and unpractical endeavour is among the most notorious in this vein of research, building a complex hierarchy that aimed at perfectly categorizing the universe.

⁶ Nathan Sanders, *A Primer on Constructed Languages*, 2.

⁷ Arika Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages: Adventures in Linguistic Creativity, Madness and Genius*, 49

The 19th century saw the rise of another important period in the history of conlang. At the time, conlangers were interested in the construction of languages that could be spoken worldwide, as an auxiliary mode of communication promoting international communication and understanding. Esperanto (1887), by Zamenhof, is still vastly spoken today and by far the most famous and successful attempt in this direction. Merging elements from numerous Western languages, Esperanto could be learnt and disseminated easily. This relatively new language now has native speakers and a fully shaped autonomous culture.

The last iconic figure to cover in this quick survey, and one that is still very influential in contemporary practices of language creation, is John R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973). The author elevated the practice to a level of complexity and “realism” that was never accomplished before. The intricacy and highly aesthetic quality of Tolkien’s project set the standards for generations of conlangers. Building whole families of related languages, Tolkien simulated the phenomena of linguistics evolution in its design, speculating and modulating his work according to the evolutionary stages of his fictional languages. The level of elaborateness in the authors’ endeavour is such that his languages can be effectively analyzed using the tools of historical linguistics⁸. His most famous projects and without a doubt the most sophisticated are the two elven languages Quenya and Sindarin, which both evolved from a shared ancestor, the Common Eldarin⁹. The history of Tolkien’s fictional languages is stretched out on thousand of years of evolution, enriched by periods of isolation and renewed contacts between populations. This process inspired a great deal of the contemporary methodologies that will be surveyed later in this chapter. It is also worthy of noting that Tolkien was creating languages for the sheer aesthetic and

⁸ David Salo, *A Gateway to Sindarin* (Salt Lake City : The University of Utah Press, 2004), 3.

⁹ David Salo, *A Gateway to Sindarin*, xiii.

intellectual pleasure it procured him, rather than for philosophical or political purposes. The author composed an important quantity of poems and proses in the various languages he created, greatly contributing to the vivacity and splendour of his projects¹⁰. Many other artistic languages, or artlang for short, were created before Tolkien, to complement works of fiction for example. However, Tolkien's dedication and seriousness in this endeavour was unprecedented. It is famously said that Tolkien created Middle-Earth so its creations could have speakers and a whole world to live in, rather than the other way around.

Across centuries, the practice of language creation has always been a quite solitary one, often perceived as strange, vain or even derivative. Novels and TV shows of the 70s and 80s gave birth to iconic and largely broadcast conlangs, such as Klingon (1988). However, no strong community of conlangers was built before the 90s and the rise of Internet. David J. Peterson, probably the most notorious persona in contemporary conlanging, created the first Conlang Listserv in 1991. This mailing list would allow constructed languages enthusiasts to share, debate, and grow together as a community. Since this coagulation of isolated creators into a strong core of practioners, an incredible acceleration of conlang production has been noticed. Even though the array of practices is plural and diverse, the material produced demonstrates a serious tendency toward the creation of artistic languages. In the last decades were born conlang monuments such as Na'vi, Dothraki and High Valyrian, walking hand in hand with the release of extremely popular sci-fi and fantastic televisual productions.

With time emerged from the community a set of best practices, as well a series of more articulated methodologies one could follow to start building his own language. The conlang

¹⁰ David Salo, *A Gateway to Sindarin*, 3.

community also developed their own lexicon of technical terms, referring to issues specific to the process of conlanging. Recently, the field even started gaining academic recognition, as courses on conlanging and scholarly articles on the topic appeared all across North America. It is noteworthy that the coming together of this community and its cementing through decades of experimentation was spearheaded by trained linguists, mostly PhD holders. According to some, it is even why any seriousness can be attributed to the activity of language creation. “With so many high profile conlangs being built by conlangers trained in linguistics, conlanging is increasingly considered a serious activity requiring specialized knowledge, artistic skill, and hard work”.¹¹

General Methodological procedure for building a constructed language

The next step in our effort to understand the basics of conlanging practices is to spend some time with the general methodological procedures forwarded by the community. Throughout the last decades, several important resources were made available by and for conlangers eager to start on their journey. Between the mailing list that is still ongoing, a very active Reddit thread, a significant number of Youtube channels and a growing number of printed publications, the amount of didactic material is quite impressive. The most popular and elaborated pedagogical sources share a common understanding of the general step-by-step process to build a coherent and structurally sound constructed language. These educators will spend a great deal of time teaching the basics of linguistic theory to the aspiring conlanger, as a set of basic rules to guide the creative process. Here is an aggregate of these main tendencies to give an idea of the overall methodology.

¹¹ Nathan Sanders, *A Primer on Constructed Languages*, 10.

The classic pathway to conlanging, previous to engaging with technical linguistic notions, would be to begin by designing a speaking population and building a set of environmental constraints. It is recommended to start with *defining the speaking subject* of the language to be. Drafting a clear environment and set of variables will be crucial to generating a coherent language, with a detailed context and precise communicational goals. “A fleshed-out history is what separates languages that are good enough from those that are excellent”.¹² The more information this environment contains, the more *efficiently the constructed language will be able to mirror its world*. Is the population established in the mountain, in the plain? Do they live in an urban setting, or are they nomadic? What is the family unit like? What type of power structure is in place? What are the sources of alimantation available? Etc. All these preliminary decisions will have a number of impacts further down the road. This can be a quite tedious and time consuming process, as fleshing out a speaking population in detail demands to take into account an incredible amount of factors. It is why many conlangers will spend a long time world-building, working on their conworld, before dipping the toe in language creation.

Once we have an idea of who speaks, and a broad notion of their livelihood, cultural and communicational needs, we can start working on the linguistics parameters. The first step is defining a sound inventory. Usually working with the range of sounds produced by the human elocution apparatus, the aspiring conlanger will carefully select the consonants and vowels that will be featured in his language. The didactic material on phonology usually presents an extensive physiological description of how sounds are produced in natural oral languages, to increase the conlanger’s understanding and mastery over the mechanism of speech. Using this theory as stepping-stone, the sound selection will suit the population’s design, playing with the

¹² David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention*, 163.

incredible variety of combinations featured in the phonetic alphabet chart. The challenge is to show creativity and inventiveness, while keeping in mind the principles that rule natural languages sound systems, such as chart symmetry, acoustic economy and brand identity¹³.

Equipped with a set of sounds, the conlanger will have to organize consonants and vowels into syllables. She will draft rules to define which associations are possible and in which order, while also stipulating which combinations aren't allowed in the language's phonology. These are called the phonotactics, and they contribute a great deal to the aesthetic qualities of the conlang. To add complexity and richness to the sound system, patterns of intonation and stress will also be determined, tying the structure with certain pragmatic considerations. The topic of pragmatics will be elaborated further in the chapter. Let's keep in mind that this selection and organization is aligned with an ideal of sonic aesthetic, based on what the designed population should sound like according to their lifestyle and communication settings¹⁴.

Once the sound system is drafted, the word building can start. When tackling the morphological landscape of a conlang, the usual strategy is to start by generating a series of roots. To these roots will be attributed basic meanings that have a significant importance in the conculture. Will then be applied a string of infixes with their own meaning, following the principles of derivative morphology. This method enables a quick and serial production of words, using only a limited set of sound parameters. The root-meaning association will often be made according to what the basic concept might sound like, using sound symbolism. If *suiiii* sounds like the flow of water in

¹³ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention*, 49.

¹⁴ This is usually where a whole set of preconceptions and pre-established aesthetic patterns come into play, reproducing ideas of how a barbaric population from the steps should sound like versus a sophisticated elven society.

a river, then *sui* might be the root for a stream of river-related words¹⁵. To illustrate this part of the process and substantiate the explanation, here is a basic example:

A conlanger wishes to create a society that lives on very unstable ground, on a territory that has been doomed with earthquakes, landslides and other cataclysms. In this setting, recognizing the qualities and variations of a shifting ground might be paramount to survival, a focus that would necessarily be taken up in language. Therefore, we could assume that a concept like *fissure* or *crack* would play an important role in the life and organization of said society. The following graphic shows how the root *ngra*, selected from the fictional population’s sound system, can be derived into a series of words through the application of several infixes.

Root	ngra	Concept for “fissure”
Augmentative Suffix: fur	ngrafur	1. Canyon, trench, 2. Separation, divorce
Diminutive Suffix: il	ngrail	1. Small cracks in rock caused by the growth of weeds 2. Scar, stiches, closed wound 3. Wrinkles
Collective Prefix: o	ongra	1. Impact, crater 2. Web, network

With this method, you can come up with large number of words in a short time. If the combination of infixes and roots creates a conflicting association in relation to the designed phonotactics, repair strategies will be needed. Even though you might have to manufacture some irregularities to diverge from the rigidity of the system and prevent a too great predictability, this is how you can come up with pretty solid lexicon.

¹⁵ Artefixian, “Creating a Language : Selecting Sounds” Youtube, February 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3378FlHK4v0>

When a certain number of words have been generated, it is time to start thinking about how they come together. The work on the conlang's syntax is quite permeable with the development of the morphology, and the conlanger will have to go back and forth between them to flesh out her system. This is when you have to answer questions of words order, grammatical gender, number and pluralisation, conceptualisation of verb tenses, modality and aspect, etc. The conlanger have to use the tools of linguistics theory to encode every detail that is meaningful to the fictional speakers. It is where the core of the conlang's grammar is developed, as is slowly defined the boundaries of sensical and syntactic enunciations. The quantity of decisions to make is quite vertiginous, in order to achieve a language that can communicate complex ideas effectively. After a while, many conlangers will try to translate texts from their mother tongue into their conlang. The passage on the Tower of Babel from the Book of Genesis is a classic. This exercise is a great tool to evaluate if your constructed language is sophisticated enough to encode the nuances and details of a natlang, and it will also show you the limitations of your lexicon.

Another important part in the process of language creation is to settle on a writing system. Some will chose to go with an adaptation of the Roman alphabet, but a majority will find it more interesting to design their own ensemble of symbols and graphs. The design of the writing system is a central element in the aesthetic development of a conculture and will contribute greatly in the embodiment of its characteristics and specificities. The conlanger will usually chose from one of the systems recognized by linguistic theory, such as alphabetic, abugida, abjad, logographic, etc. Either working with only one of these, or creating combinations, the main concern will be to reflect the most appropriate type of writing for the constructed culture. The kind of tools used for writing will have a significant impact on the material qualities of the character design.

When this set of rules is developed, we obtain what is called a proto-language. Contingent to the initial goals and the level of precision required, this basic structure might be enough. However, many conlangers are in it for the long run, and will keep working on their project for many years, adding layers upon layers of precision and complexity. For those working in this direction, the following step would be to take the pristine structure that is the proto-language and to machine it through a linguistics evolutionary model. This is also known as the historical method, which is similar to the way Tolkien has been creating. Working from the data collected by linguists on how languages move through time, space and populations, the proto-language will be submitted to a variety of phonological, lexical and grammatical alterations. The goal behind this process is to add *naturalism* and richness to the language. “Understanding the principles of linguistic evolution is the most important prerequisite for understanding the tenets of naturalistic language creation.”¹⁶ The constructed language will feel more at home in a complex fictional world when it shows the influence of eras, population displacement, technology advancement and other transformational factors on its very structure. It is in this process that are built in a series of exceptions and irregularities, which will give the conlang more proximity to the way *natural language* behave. With this in mind, some conlangers end-up creating whole families of related languages, organized in a bifurcating tree rooted in the history of the constructed universe.

¹⁶ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention*, 163.

So far, we surveyed the general history and methodology of language creation as the community construes it. To stage a constructive conversation on the theoretical landscape of languages in the making, there are several concepts in the literature of conlang that need to be discussed. These notions will also offer us an indispensable foothold to veer toward a process philosophical account of language creation, and assess the politics and ethics behind this endeavour.

Natlang and Naturalism

A chief concept featured across conlang's literature is the idea of natural language, also referred to as natlang. The natural language comes in direct opposition to the constructed language, contrasting their points of origin, the *intentionality* and creativity that lie behind the process and its evolution through time. What is encompassed in the category of natural languages also plays the role of value barometer, as a way to measure the conlanger's level of understanding of technical linguistic notions. Across the didactic material for language creation, several definitions of natlang are made accessible. Here is a first one:

“A natlang(natural language) is an ordinary language that evolved naturally without conscious planning, such as English, Finnish, Mandarin, Quechua, and Arabic. This stands in contrast to a conlang(constructed language), which is deliberately designed by one or more conlangers, the real humans whose imagination and hard work a conlang is derived from, such as Hildegard of Bingen, J.R.R. Tolkien, Marc Okrand, David J. Peterson, and the Pataxó community building Patxohã.”¹⁷

From this definition, the notion of human intentionality, of deliberate design and hard work, is what stands as the most important characteristic opposing conlangs to natlangs. Here is a second definition:

¹⁷ Nathan Sanders, *A Primer on Constructed Languages*, 11.

“Any of the language that happen to exist in the world and evolved naturally. The point of emphasis is the nature of the origin of the system. Languages that began their existence by an act of conscious creation will share important features in common with other created languages that they won’t share with natural languages.”¹⁸

Again, the thoughtful and conscious process of designing and the ability to pinpoint the origin, versus the natural evolution of a language, is what will set apart the constructed language from the natural one. Now, it should be reiterated that an important portion of the conlang community and its most popular figures are highly trained linguists. This nucleus will of course induce strong theoretical influences on what it means for a language to be natural, and it will affect the process of creating languages. Among the collateral effects of this solid shared background in linguistic is the strong focus of conlanging practices on what is called *naturalistic* languages. The concept of naturalistic language, closely tied to the idea of natlang, “tries as nearly as possible to emulate the quirks and idiosyncrasies of natural languages”¹⁹. Even though it is often said that there is no specific value attributed to the naturalistic conlang over the “abstract” one, the vast majority of didactic and published material made accessible focuses on giving tools for the former. Imitating how language “works in the real world” is described as a great teaching tool for those less familiar with the structures of scientific linguistics. The assumption made is that if you know the principles and universals that rule the linguistic phenomena, you might then be able to break them and get creative.²⁰

¹⁸ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention*, 19.

¹⁹ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention, Episode 22 : Why Naturalism*, Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yE3ldJSXW24>, October 24, 2016

²⁰ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention, Episode 22 : Why Naturalism*,

Unsurprisingly, it would be a mistake to think of the conlang community as a single monolithic voice. Indeed, the debate on the tenets of naturalistic language and their employment in conlanging practices features a series of different points of view. The more conservative voice asserts that to succeed at creating a naturalistic language, one shouldn't try to be creative or original.

“A naturalistic conlang must to a great extent be uninnovative and recycle things which are found in various natlangs, (...) The innovation must mostly content itself with which features are eclectically combined. A bit like cooking where you use basically the same ingredients in more or less novel combinations.”²¹

A complementary commentary reiterates the relation between natural languages and academic training. “The strongest form of naturalism (to my mind) is to create a conlang that a linguistically educated person could confuse for a real, human language”²². To have the authority to say that it feels like language, you should be “linguistically educated”.

Another interpretation of the concept presents a different entry point to natural languages, working with a perspective of language acquisition rather than a specialist typologist. Here, the concerns of a naturalistic approach are displaced from the notion of originality towards a preoccupation for elaborateness.

«...Where the conlanger approaches the conlang not with the mindset of a typologist but with the mindset of the learners and speakers of the language, inhabiting it from within, modelling its sociolinguistics, its dialectology, its contact linguistics and its diachrony The exoticism or ordinariness

²¹ BPJ, “Naturalistic Conlang Re:,” Listserv May 29, 2020, <https://listserv.brown.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind2005e&L=CONLANG&P=6839>

²² wmbathers, *What is meant by Naturalism*, Reddit, July 7 2015. https://www.reddit.com/r/conlangs/comments/3chuxt/what_is_meant_by_naturalism/

of the language is, to me, of less importance than the elaborateness of the modelling. To my mind, it's only through that elaborateness that one can hope to emulate the majesty of natlangs.»²³

Although the idea of inhabiting a language from within is a proposition that I would like to hear more about, the current ensemble of definitions of natural language and naturalism are unsatisfactory to me. Let's take a step back. Rather than going heads on with the concepts of natural language and naturalism and detail why I think they are inadequate, I would rather take a detour through another set of concepts: pragmatics and context. Usually forgotten in conlanging practices and often in linguistics altogether, pragmatics will be our doorway to create an intersection between conlang's theoretical background and a process philosophical conversation. Even though understood in widely different ways by the two fields, pragmatics will allow us to operate a shift from the understanding of language put forward by the field of linguistics into a process philosophical conceptual frame of language. I hope this will help us to locate the core of language somewhere else than in pattern reproducibility and retrieve some of the boundless richness of meaning creation.

Pragmatics in linguistics

The following overview of the field of pragmatics takes many shortcuts, but it will help us understand some of the basic principles that rule the domain and assist us greatly in apprehending distinctive models of meaning creation. In scientific linguistics, pragmatics is considered to work as a component in a larger theory of language, just like the study of phonology, morphology, syntax or semantics. However, before the domain of pragmatics emerged as a systematized entity, it didn't get thorough attention. Many occurrences that couldn't be explained by the

²³ And Rosta, "Naturalistic Conlang Re:" Listserv, June 2, 2020, <https://listserv.brown.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind2006a&L=CONLANG&P=4834>

general, binary, truth-conditional linguistic models of understanding were discarded as pragmatic incidences. It is how the field first acquired the status of “linguistics wastebasket”, as an ensemble of disjointed elements. Eventually, some coherence and order was given to this stream of leftover theories and concepts, in order to obtain a more reliable catalogue of principles and ideas. Even though it still shares some blurry boundaries with the domain of semantics, pragmatics became a field of study in its own rights, with its own tradition of thought. This reorganization allowed for agreed upon, general definitions to emerge, palatable in introductory lessons. Here is one of them, taken from the MIT textbook on Linguistics:

“Pragmatics must identify central uses of language, it must specify the conditions for linguistic expressions to be used in those ways, and it must seek to uncover general principles of language use”²⁴

The goal of establishing general rules and universals, and the way it systematizes usage according to specific conditions of expressability, is paramount to our understanding of pragmatics in Linguistics. It will be taken up later in our conversation with Deleuze and Guattari’s and their account of the topic. A second definition, found in the Oxford’s Textbook in Linguistics on Pragmatics, reinforces the first description.

“The systematic study of meaning by virtue of, or dependent on, the use of language. The central topics of inquiry of pragmatics include the implicature, presupposition, speech act, and deixis.”²⁵

²⁴ Adrian Akmajian, Richard A. Demers, Ann K. Farmer, Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, 6th edition (Cambridge : MIT Press, 2010), 363

²⁵ Yan Huang, *Pragmatics* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007), 2

Again, we observe how the field rests on a methodical understanding of utterances and their usage. This definition is also helpful to understand the division of pragmatics into subfields. One of the reasons to include the study of pragmatics into an integrated linguistic theory is explained by the Linguistic Underdeterminacy thesis²⁶. It highlights the wide gap that exists between the formulation of a proposition and its expressed meaning when uttered by a speaker. There seem to be an untameable margin of inaccuracy in the employment of language. “Probably the most pervasive characteristic of human social interaction (...) is that we talk.”²⁷ What is linguistically encoded is always partially distorted by the specificities of the utterance and how it echoes the vast array of contextual parameters. Therefore, the study of pragmatics allows us to clarify these zones of underdeterminacy and stipulates the necessary factors for an utterance’s reproducibility of meaning.

If pragmatics studies the circumstantial usage of utterances, we must take some time to question the treatment of *context* as helping concept. Huang talks about context as “referring to any relevant features of the dynamic setting or environment in which a linguistic unit is systematically used.”²⁸ Once more, we should notice the need for systematic use and how it shapes the understanding of pragmatics. The context can be analysed, its relevant parts identify and set aside in order to preserve the conditions of repeatability of iteration. If some components are relevant for systematization, then it means that others can be discarded without theoretically affecting the *meaning* of said utterance. Another definition of context helps us clarify the relevance of contextual components.

²⁶ Yan Huang, *Pragmatics* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007), 5

²⁷ Adrian Akmajian, Richard A. Demers, Ann K. Farmer, Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication, 6th edition* (Cambridge : MIT Press, 2010), 364

²⁸ Yan Huang, *Pragmatics* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007), 13

“Context can extend to the immediate physical and social environment as well; and finally, it can encompass general knowledge. Each of these concentric circles of context can play a role in the interpretation of an utterance”.²⁹

Thus, physical environment, social environment and general knowledge are the elements to factor in if one wants to understand how context comes into play in an utterance. The structure, once understood and formalized as such (a grammar), is then put in the world, in *context*, and will undergo a variety of transformations and alterations. Pragmatics will study these variations and try to build systematic, principled and rational models to understand them. It is striking that linguistic textbooks are often organized in this sequential pattern, starting with phonetics, morphology and syntax, while leaving pragmatics and semantics for the end.

To finalize our brief overview of pragmatics in the field of linguistics, let's take a look at the way this area is understood and treated in the rapidly growing body of work on constructed languages. The resources are scarce, but not inexistent. In *The Art of Language Invention*, Peterson very quickly touches on pragmatic considerations in his chapter on sound systems³⁰. Talking about pragmatic intonation, he explains how intonation patterns communicate a great amount of information in any given utterance, according to the variation of pitch in a sentence. Peterson insists that “intonational flavouring”³¹, and its pragmatic implications, is a crucial feature to include when aiming for the creation of an authentic feeling language. In *The Language Construction Kit*, a full chapter is dedicated to pragmatics. It is mostly a theoretical summary of

²⁹ Adrian Akmajian, Richard A. Demers, Ann K. Farmer, Robert M. Harnish, *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, 6th edition (Cambridge : MIT Press, 2010), 389

³⁰ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention*, p.63

³¹ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention*, p.63

the fundamental principles of pragmatics understood by Linguistics, with some insights on how it might add some savour to a language project. Among the main Youtube channels providing resources for conlanging, such as Artefixian, Biblaridion, and Jan Misali, none of them seriously deal with pragmatics as a required methodological step, like it is the case for phonology, morphology and syntax.

It seems that even though recognized as foundational part of any theory of language, pragmatics are not an essential step to go through when building a language, even a “naturalistic” one. Rather, if treated at all, this facet of language is usually left for the end, as additional flavouring to a well-developed structure. Therefore, a diminutive number of conlangs will ever “go so far” as engaging with pragmatic considerations. It is quite indicative of the ways in which meaning and sense are understood to work and are implemented in a conlanging process. Operating with a sequencing of sub-disciplines inherited from scientific linguistics, it appears possible to create a functional and authentic feeling of language, isolated from pragmatic considerations.

Language and Pragmatics in Deleuze and Guattari

To investigate processes of language creation from a different angle, and operate with a radically different understanding of language’s mechanisms, Deleuze and Guattari offer us singularly useful tools. The rest of the chapter will be thinking with their philosophy, examining several of their concepts, and hopefully move us toward ethical considerations that will unsettle the current methodological framework of constructed languages. In a *Thousand Plateaus*³², the two authors present a theory of language that goes against everything the field of scientific linguistics cherishes and believes in. This shifting on its head of the field of linguistics walks hand in hand

³² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi

with a series of critics and perturbations the authors formulate on a variety of disciplines, such as mathematics, geology, cartography, botanic, etc. The radical propositions they argue for in their theory of language overflows from the fourth and fifth plateaus and rushes across the entirety of the volume. The whole book vibrates with this multi-faceted ontogenetical revolution.

To operate this critical shift, Deleuze and Guattari make a series of conceptual moves and coin new concepts to help them reshape the theoretical landscape of meaning creation. In their *Postulates on Linguistics*³³, the term *order-word* is one of the fundamental concepts they elaborate. It is described as the basic unit of language. Order-words are socially structured relationships, qualifying the bond between an utterance and the immediate implications it has on bodies, the incorporeal transformation they enact. They are formatted chiefly through redundancy, and they affect bodies simultaneously with their enunciation. The redundant quality of the order-word is crucial, because it immediately situates language in a social field. Utterances are taken up again and again by series of speakers, repeating the sign-body encounter they have been programmed to enact. The redundancy of the utterance also cements the expectations and responsibility to uphold the established relation between signs and bodies.

The incorporeal transformation qualifies what language does performatively to bodies, not in the actual flesh, but in the way it transforms the nexus of relations and assumptions around said bodies. Deleuze and Guattari offer us many examples for these immediate alterations operated through the transformative power of language. The plane transporting-body is immediately converted into the plane prison-body once the assault is declared. The verdict formulated by the judge, enacted through the order-word, changes the suspect into a convict. The declaration of war

³³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, 75

will instantaneously affect thousands of bodies at the very moment of its formulation. This temporal precision in the transformation allows an effective dating of the order-word. Order-words can move through time and space, reverberating across a variety of contexts and utterers, merging with new social fields of becoming. Through the order-word, language is never neutral, and always enacts a homogenizing and normative power.

With this in mind, all language is necessarily expressed in indirect discourse. According to Deleuze and Guattari, an utterance's purpose is not to represent or mirror the world, nor does it act as a seamless transmission of information from A to B, from signifier to signified. Rather, it creates a map-like operation that inevitably deploys itself through a network of intertwined relations, redundancy and bodies. Language doesn't operate from a first to a second, but always from a second to a third. The order-word is the presence of the statement within the statement. This network serves for the transmission of the order-word, communicating the series of specific acts that are necessarily implied in the enunciation. Thus, an expression is always born from collective assemblage, from a fluid and connective complexity of heterogeneous components coalescing into articulation. There is no such a thing as a discrete enunciation born in an individual's mind; it necessarily operates in the social field.

Thinking of language through the order-word as basic unit demands a reorganisation of the siloed discipline of linguistics, allowing Deleuze and Guattari to completely shift the role and site of pragmatics in their theory of language. The breach they created will be enjoyed as an opportunity to opens new avenues in our conversation on constructed languages. Rather than thinking of pragmatics as an incidence happening to an already formed structure, as mishaps and late transformations, they situate pragmatics as the crucial relational component inherent to language.

Instead of being categorized as a sub-field of linguistics, pragmatics is understood as absolutely central to an effective conceptualization of language. It is an overflow that leaks everywhere; it is the creation of meaning.

“Pragmatics ceases to be a "trash heap," pragmatic determinations cease to be subject to the alternative: fall outside language, or answer to explicit conditions that syntacticize and semanticize pragmatic determinations. Instead, pragmatics becomes the presupposition behind all of the other dimensions and insinuates itself into everything.”³⁴

This means that there is no such a thing as a structure distorted by contextual usage. It's the other way around. Constants and rules extracted from lines of variation. Circumstances mean everything to the eventful coming to life of the utterance, to the speech act. However, let it be clear that in DG's work, unlike in linguistics, there is no reliance on context as a repeatable set of parsed and ordered factors. Rather, context becomes milieu: an ecological understanding of pragmatics. Opposing ecology to context is a way to surrender to the event's complexity, to accept its singularity and uniqueness, to see that it came into itself *just this way*. The concept of the event describes the coalescence of the Many into concrete entities³⁵, the extraction of a unique occurrence from the field of the virtual. It is also something that will always have been, which will keep reverberating across new occasions.

An ecological understanding of pragmatics suggests that all these variations and tendencies are necessary and influential in the direction taken by the event-meaning. Therefore, the attempt of formulating universal rules and principles is vain and superficial. Making pragmatics a subfield

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli : Leibniz et le Baroque* (Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1988)

of linguistics that aims at analyzing the contextual variations of an utterance is antithetical with Deleuze and Guattari's stance. They hammer again and again that there is no such a thing as intrinsic linguistic universals:

“For it is obvious that the constants are drawn from the variables themselves; universals in linguistics have no more existence in themselves than they do in economics and are always concluded from a universalization or a rendering-uniform involving variables.”³⁶

To understand pragmatics as ecological also disrupts the idea of an omnipotent expressive intentionality in the speaking subject. We can no longer understand a proposition as being solely the result of the human subject's volition. The utterance is composed through a nexus of forces colliding, with certain tendencies taking over in this unique set. Meaning is an event in which its pronunciation by the subject is only one the numerous components intervening. It vascularizes the interrelations of relations that could never be reproduced in the exact same way. Rather than operating a systematic classification of the valuable and disposable elements of the contextual enunciation, an ecological account encompasses all the minute variations, way beyond the human. Deconstructing the subject's volition as generator of all meaningful occasion is crucial for moving toward a processual understanding of language creation, and will be treated in more detail in the second chapter.

Another consequence of this perspective on pragmatics is that it nullifies the common assumption that there is such a thing as a vacuumed fictional world where the conlang operates, and the “real-world” of the outside. The conlang is in and of the world, and is moved by its political tendencies

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, 103

from the very beginning. It is urgent to stop pretending for neutrality and naturalism. The theory of language is already replete with political implication, already invested in these models.

« But the scientific model taking language as an object of study is one with the political model by which language is homogenized, centralized, standardized, becoming a language of power, a major or dominant language. (...) What is grammaticality, and the sign S, the categorical symbol that dominates statements? It is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker, and Chomsky's trees establish constant relations between power variables. Forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws. No one is supposed to be ignorant of grammaticality; those who are belong in special institutions. The unity of language is fundamentally political. »³⁷

Here, Deleuze and Guattari highlight the fundamental correspondence between the linguistic model and the power structure it upholds. What holds the grammatical together is an intertwined series of authority relations, generating expectation to follow the rules. Not being linguistically apt subjects one to an ensemble of potential diagnosis and treatments. We cannot dissociate the establishment of a theory of language from the forces that made it come into itself, and the inherent desire for these structures to maintain themselves. Arguably, it is this very move of stabilizing stream of utterances into a linguistic consistency that give any legitimacy to the field of linguistics from an academic perspective. It confers the authority to put language under scrutiny and make it a valuable object of study. “Invariants, whether atomic or relational—is essential to linguistics. It is what allows linguistics to claim a basis in pure scientificity, to be nothing but science ... safe from any supposedly external or pragmatic factor.”³⁸

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, 101

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi.

If there is no such a thing as a universal, nothing to capture and immobilize the utterances, what is it that holds the field of sayability together? How do we know what we're speaking? This is where the authors introduce a vast array of potential treatments of a language, putting into question the very notion of what is a field of sayability.

«In the course of a single day, an individual repeatedly passes from language to language. He successively speaks as "father to son" and as a boss; to his lover, he speaks an infantilized language; while sleeping he is plunged into an oniric discourse, then abruptly returns to a professional language when the telephone rings. It will be objected that these variations are extrinsic, that it is still the same language. But that is to prejudge the question. First, it is not certain that the phonology is the same, nor the syntax, nor the semantics. Second, the whole question is whether this supposedly identical language is defined by invariants or, on the contrary, by the line of continuous variation running through it. »³⁹

In the light of the above, we are now able to get some perspective on how scientific linguistic construes the phenomena of language, and consequently challenge the theoretical assumptions made by conlang methodologies. Based on the analysis presented in this chapter, these methods are preoccupied with creating representations of an idealised conception of language. According to a theory where pragmatics occupies center stage, scientific linguistics discards an immense portion of the process of meaning creation, in order to make it palatable for the model. We can no longer think of the conlanger as individual creator, operating solely on intentionality, understanding of linguistics theory and creative drive. Nor can we take for granted that concepts like natlang and naturalism effectively deal with the fields of possibilities and complexity of the event of language. It functions as what Deleuze and Guattari call a *décalque*, a tracing that selects broad strokes while leaving behind a precious and unaccountable excess. Then, the field of

³⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi

conlang recuperates this interpretation of language and builds a methodology where pragmatics is almost erased, treated as a stylistic additive. By elevating this methodology as sole reference for practitioners of language construction, a second calquing operation is effectuated. A conlang that emulates a system that is itself preoccupied with the codification of the phenomena of language. A series of superimposed calques, that leaves so much behind that it is crucial to question what we take for granted as being natural. My move is not to discredit conlanging practices as a monolithic normative entity, nor to say that they will irremediably uphold homogenizing power structures. However, we should be careful of the ways in which linguistic models necessarily problematize the phenomena of language and the political ramifications associated with them.

So the question I think a process philosophical inquiry would ask here is, *what else?* In a creative practice such as the construction of fields of sayability, what are the avenues that are condemned by systematically following a method that flattens the shifting topography of language? Instead of this calquing function so characteristic of linguistics' operations, Deleuze and Guattari call for an approach that takes into account the continuous lines of variation that operate within, through and across languages. They want a chromatic account of linguistics, an ethico-aesthetic endeavour that will constantly and painfully stretch the structure towards the agrammatical.

CHAPTER TWO

Art and Processes

In a recently published book on constructed languages⁴⁰, a group of some of the most prominent thinkers and practitioners of conlang in North America assess the growing popularity of conlanging as an academic field, and review some of the current ways of teaching and creating languages. In the last chapter of the book, David J. Peterson, who created among the most famous and iconic conlangs of the last decades, argues for the recognition of conlanging as a legitimate art practice and states the importance of aesthetic consideration in teaching. He explains how this goal can be achieved through the building of a clear methodology of production and evaluation, and perpetuated by means of a coherent teaching program. While being an extremely knowledgeable and creative conlanger, I think that Peterson's account of art practices and what they can do is quite dated and deserves to be challenged. In this chapter, I will argue that the scope of contemporary art practices is much vaster and exciting than the description made by Peterson, and situates its potential somewhere else than from within the alignment to a rigorous method.

I will first detail my understanding of Peterson's reasoning on artistry, the presupposed methodological need and its reinforcement through teaching. I will also summarize his point of view of how this teaching might benefit to the whole community by opening the field's professional perspectives. Then, I will suggest that encouraging institutional capture and the instrumentalization of creative processes toward legalization is in fact very detrimental to the richness and potential of artistic processes.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Punske, Nathan Sanders and Amy V. Fountain, *Language Invention in Linguistics Pedagogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

To support this point, I will call upon Erin Manning’s account of art as *way*, whose perspective on creation and research significantly broadens the scope of what it means to make. It will help us reorient the conversation toward a definition of art that is processual, and which value isn’t fixed in advance by a strict methodology. Moving toward processuality will also mean operating outside the general understanding of objects and time, and relinquishing human intentionality and subject creativity as the motor of expression and art. Finally, I will argue how the crafting of techniques of relation might be useful for a renovated approach on conlang practices.

My goal in this chapter is not to deny the “art status” of conlanging practices, but rather to situate its creative potential somewhere else and look into what are the other paths that can be taken to get there.

Conlanging as Art

In the second section of his article named *Artistry as Language Invention: Conlang pedagogy and the instructor as authority*⁴¹, Peterson describes the necessary steps for the field of conlanging to be taken seriously and recognised as a legitimate art form. He starts by describing how conlang practitioners began to organize themselves into a more structured community and how a set of ideal practices slowly emerged. “As it grew, the community’s shared sense of artistry grew and expanded as well. What began as an individual endeavour had grown into a movement, with a shared terminology classification system and sense of aesthetics”⁴². Peterson

⁴¹ David J. Peterson, “Artistry as Language Invention: Conlang pedagogy and the instructor as authority” in *Language Invention in Linguistics Pedagogy*, ed. Jeffrey Punske, Nathan Sanders and Amy V. Fountain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 207

⁴² David J. Peterson, *Artistry as Language Invention: Conlang pedagogy and the instructor as authority*.

suggests that to organize a movement, there is a need to establish a common sense of value and the definition of what is a worthy practice. The only way to move beyond “pure subjectivity”, to structure appreciation and complete the field’s unification is to instigate and teach a reproducible method. Peterson’s framework is clearly defined in a three-points set of rules. If a conlanger is presenting a serious work, they have the responsibility to do the following:

1. state the specific goals of their work;
2. state the limitations of their work;
3. demonstrate how their conlang achieves the goals they laid out for it, within the stated limitations.⁴³

The question of responsibility is recurrent, both for the creator and the evaluator. The evaluator’s role, closely tied to the student’s, will be to determine the goal’s worth, note whether the limitations are suitably situated and evaluate if the product meets the expectations defined from the outset. Both roles need to walk hand-in-hand through the process in order to effectively solidify the structure.

“If conlanging is an art form, then it must be taken seriously, both by the conlanger and the evaluator. Specifically, the level of effort a conlanger puts into their work is the level of effort the evaluator should put into evaluating their work. Each has a responsibility.”⁴⁴

The evaluator and the student are here made accountable for the upholding and reproduction of the method. It is also important to remember that in order to be properly evaluated, the goals need to be precise, unambiguous and concise. Peterson specifies that “the explicitness of these goals

⁴³ David J. Peterson, *Artistry as Language Invention: Conlang pedagogy and the instructor as authority*, 210.

⁴⁴ David J. Peterson, *Artistry as Language Invention: Conlang pedagogy and the instructor as authority*.

allows the conlang to be evaluated as a serious work of art⁴⁵. To be valued as a work of art, an alignment with methodology is required. Peterson pushes his reasoning further by giving us an idea of how this type of teaching could be beneficial for the whole conlang community, especially for those who aspire to make a profession of it. A procedure of capitalization of aesthetics is thus initiated. By offering a more structured and systematized approach to conlanging, the university will make better conlangers, but also “produce critical conlang consumers”. Since conlanging now has a growing commercial value, it becomes increasingly important that the students trained in conlanging raise the bar of appreciation. Therefore, if the general public is more informed and critical of the fictional languages featured in movies and books, the entertainment industry would have no choice but to hire more professional conlangers. New jobs would be created for the skilled language creators, and the goal to make a livelihood of one’s passion would become more attainable.

By encouraging the building of a set of reproducible and recognizable patterns of production and evaluation, I think Peterson effectively identifies the path to structure an academic field, create canons and establish authority. In the long run, it might also create a bigger demand for professional conlangers. I also think that this capture of the field by the institutional apparatus is exactly how you kill art’s potential.

⁴⁵ David J. Peterson, *Artistry as Language Invention: Conlang pedagogy and the instructor as authority*.

The Art Conundrum

In the postscript of *The Art of Language Invention*, Peterson writes: “What is art? Philosophy aside, we all know what it is: it’s something original and creative that requires some specific set of skills to create that has been produced by a human.”⁴⁶ Looking at this definition, I think it might be time to bring philosophy back into the loop, and take a moment to consider some of the incredibly vast body of knowledge produced on the question of what art might be. Without even addressing the reduction to human expressivity, I would start by interrogating the recurrent preoccupation “is this art?” I think it is not a very productive beginning, and a good portion of the art field has moved on from this a long time ago. This question has much more to do with defining what fits or doesn’t fit within the rubric of “art.” From there, the usual path is to discuss who belongs and who doesn’t, establishing clear boundaries and authority. This does not generate creative process, nor does it really get to the question of art. Rather, it makes clear how this orchestration of value is a hierarchical operation. This becomes apparent when observing the frequency at which Peterson reiterates the need for the field of constructed languages to be “taken seriously”. It also highlights the amalgamation that occurs between the gain of status and credibility, the recognition by the academic institution, versus an inquiry into what an artistic process might generate. We can get another example of this unfortunate amalgamation by considering the question of money as legitimization, which is frequently repeated.

If conlanging is just another art, one would hope that one could aspire to have a life like another artist in another field. (...) Nevertheless, we now live in a reality where there exists a vanishingly small number of professional conlangers, and an extraordinary amount of unpaid yet highly skilled conlangers.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ David J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention*.

⁴⁷ David J. Peterson, *Artistry as Language Invention: Conlang pedagogy and the instructor as authority*.

I am of course not suggesting that artists should not be paid for their work, but rather that the outcome of creation, conlanging included, might be situated somewhere else than in its transformation into market value. For art to maintain its speculative potential, it is crucial to learn how to distinguish it from the establishment of social credit, the creation of canons and its morphing into a form recognizable and classifiable by the university. To draw this line, and to work with an account of what art can do that is a bit more precise than “there are as many definitions of art as there are artists”⁴⁸, I would like to think with Manning’s redefinition of art as “way”⁴⁹. It will help us establishing new bearings and avoid falling into meaningless relativism. Looking for an entryway to art that is not subject-centered, Manning builds a series of very effective conceptual tools that liberate us from the categories that are normally at play in the notion of art. She opens a path for an art-as-practice freed from the imperative of the subject/object division, a linear conception of time of creation and consumption and the passive-active divisions of actors in the field.

Object

The first step of this redefinition is to unsettle the persistent tendency of amalgamating art with object. Our current understanding of art is often bound to its objecthood, and it is one of the first things dismantled by Manning. “An object in itself is not art. Art is the way, the manner of becoming that is intensified by the coming-out-of-itself of an object”⁵⁰. Here, the author moves away from a definition of art that is calcified in the material boundaries of the object, immobilized by concerns of form and container. Instead, art as way moves across the relational

⁴⁸ David J. Peterson, “Re : Calling all Conlangers”, January 21, 2002, <http://archives.conlang.info/ce/jusae/theilvepian.html>

⁴⁹ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2016).

⁵⁰ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*.

matrix that generates and is affected by the object's coming to be. Let it be clear that "object" is here understood in its larger sense, as a series of factors and characteristics composing a coherent and "slowed" entity. The most immaterial of art practices can be captured and abstracted from its processes as much as any sculpture or painting, isolating a flux of becoming into an easily apprehensible husk.

Art as object is still a very common way of understanding creative practices, even among contemporary art organizations. It is this fixation of process into sedentary object-boundaries that allow for its easy definition, evaluation, circulation and consumption. Art as object simplifies its monetization, and therefore flows easily across institutions. In most Fine Art departments, the students are asked to circumscribe their practice into concise art statements, to define their audience and to clarify how their work should be "presented the world". These are the necessary steps for any aspiring artist to transform their work into graspable objects, and effectively enter the circuit of exhibitions, residencies and grant application.

In the case of conlanging practices, I would suggest that "focusing on the object" means placing at the fore the very precise set of rules that circumscribe a fictional field of sayability. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the current tools of language creation provided by the community are almost exclusively at the service of building of a grammar. The grammar of a conlang, no matter how complex, linguistically informed and "naturalistic" it appears to be, cannot be equated with art for the sole purpose of its *being* there. Static and pristine systems don't take into consideration the necessary margins of variability for an understanding of art as *way*. I don't believe that constructed languages are by nature fixed objects, but that they do come across this way when framed by linguistics normative theories and method. Going beyond the pretended

fixity of the conlang-object would mean considering this set of rules as simply a passage, a fecund intersection point always in displacement that has the power to generate alternative modes of moving with language. Brian Massumi tell us that “to perceive the world in an object frame is to neglect the wider range of its germinal reality”⁵¹. The critical endeavour would be to locate the germinal reality of processes of language construction.

Time

Structuring an argument coherent with art as *way* has implications for a number of components surrounding creative processes. One of the assumptions in need of remodelling is how time is understood. As Manning highlights, thinking in terms of art as a finished object implies a specific temporal construction. “This is the paradox: for there to be a theory of the “object”, the “object” has to be conceived as out of time, relegated beyond experience, unchanging”⁵². Objecthood is an abstraction, a cutout from the intrinsic movement of forms, trying to make it fit in a quantifiable time, a metric. In an object-centered account of art, time is usually conceived as working in a linear and hierarchical fashion. According to this division, there is the time of the making by the artist, and the time of its appreciation by the audience. There is an active/passive assumption behind this binary, which relegates the viewer as mere activator of an already formed apparatus. This division of time is very coherent with the sequential methodology proposed by Peterson in his article on how to legitimate conlang as an art form.

Taking us beyond the two times of the art as object, that of making, and that of receiving, Manning crafts a conceptual web around what she calls the *art of time*. “Art not as the form an

⁵¹ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2011), 6.

⁵² Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 48.

object takes, but as the manner in which time is composed”⁵³ Instead of thinking of objects as endpoints fixed in their material boundaries, they are understood as conduits, considered for their qualitative feeling and how they edge in experience. More than a dimensional shape, it is their potential of feltness, their *feeling-form*, which will bend into the field of experience. What we call an object is in fact always *still on its way*, in continual composition in a complex ecological matrix. It is never settled, fully achieved, but flows from one event to another. The experiential feltness of the object on its way can never be contained in its form, continuity reinvented in a new relational composition. The formal capture is always an addition after the act.

“The art of time is the proposition art can make to a world in continual composition. It is also the proposition that opens art to its outside, to art as in-act, to practice as the crafting of emergent collectivities. Instead of immediately turning to form its resolution, the art of time can ask how techniques of relation become a conduit for a relational movement that exceeds the very form-taking art so often strives toward.”⁵⁴

Manning argues that art has the potential of bringing to the fore the overflow of the feeling-form, to make palpable the contraction, dilatation and expansion of event-time. A time that is felt and experienced, and that can’t be measured with metrics typically used to circumscribe its passing. By refusing to settle in object resolution, the mingling of experience speculates toward prospective futurities, making felt what has yet to come.

⁵³ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 51.

⁵⁴ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 52.

Participation

Another thrilling move Manning makes in her account of art as *way*, consequential to disrupting the times of creation, is to dislodge the figure of artist as central operator. If there is no such a thing as a time of making for the maker and a time of receiving for the audience, then who or what is responsible for the creating? How do we locate the event of art? To do so, we need to stop considering human volition as the exclusive motor of art practices, subtract the intentionality of the creator as first component and recognize the ecological grounds behind any coming to expression. When describing participation, Manning lifts the veil on the inherently collective nature of all practices. Thinking in terms of intermingling processes of becoming eventfully coagulating into a given expression, the artist-as-creative-genius needs to be taken down from his pedestal. By activating the concept of transindividuation, the author paints a broader landscape of the creative forces mobilized in art and reminds us that every practice is already collective.

“From the perspective of transindividuation, participation is always already there, active as the more-than at the heart of the event in its formation. Participation is not the way the outside adds itself to a process already under way, but the operational multiplicity of a practice in its unfolding”. “All events are transindividual at their core, and by extension, all artistic processes are capable of mobilizing this transindividual share”.⁵⁵

Individuals cannot be the starting point, because they are themselves formed within the event, building on their pre-individual share. The pre-individual qualifies the affective charge and relational potential always in movement prior to a conrescence into “discrete bodies”. Processes of individuation, accompanied by the charge of the pre-individual, never create finished

⁵⁵ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 55.

individuals, but rather an arch of consistency constantly shifting and fluctuating. A metastability that shelters all the worlds in action hidden behind the usage of an “I”.

The question of participatory practices has been much debated in contemporary art theory through the last decades, effectively complicating the once entrenched division between maker and audience. However, it doesn't prevent the artist or the curator to treat the practice as happening before its presentation to the public, and therefore backgrounding the more-than human collectivities always already at play. There seems to be serious similarities between a thinking of participation as an outside addition onto an already formed entity, and the way scientific linguistics deals with pragmatics.

In the first chapter, I highlighted how conlang literature formulates a strict division between so-called natural languages and constructed languages. One of the clear differences reiterated by many authors of the field is the specifically volitional nature behind every conlang, and its development through the original and creative force of an individual. A constructed language is coined as *constructed* because its point of origin can be accurately located in time and associated with one mind's work, whereas a natural language's origin cannot be pinpointed among natural evolution processes. It is this specific connexion, of subjects making objects, from which a process philosophical account on art tries to liberate itself. The idea of the artist as single creator is coherent with locating art in fixed object, defined by the boundaries of its container.

This shift in conceptualization of art as *not* a clearly defined object nor produced from the volition of a creative consciousness successfully unsettles the relation that Peterson tries to establish between the construction of languages and art practices. If we accept this premise and

subtract the object from art's definition, a fixed method can no longer dictate guidelines of good practices and define the work's worth. If we truly engage in a speculative process and trust that it can produce new forms of knowledge, we must accept that we might not possess the tools for its evaluation yet. It means that we must reinvent value each time, in the occasion. To define a conlang as a set of rules conscribing a fictional field of sayability, developed by an original human mind, means very little to an understanding of art as *way*. Then, if art is none of the things we thought it was, how do we get legitimization, and what are we left with, beside method, authority and canons? Maybe the search for legitimacy is not faithful to art's potential, more so when carried by the art of time and the art of participation. However, I am still convinced of the very fecund potential of constructed languages, as technique for bringing to life unforeseen modes of relationality.

Techniques and Technicity

A very potent concept that traverses Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's work, both in their common and individual writing practices, is the idea of technique. With an account of art as way, we are able to identify the failures and defaults of Peterson's definition of art. Moving forward with the concept of technique will give us clues on what conditions of practice we can give ourselves to generate a processual movement and iteratively recharge its speculative potential.

A technique of relation is something to put things in motion, to encapacitate the ecological components at play toward eventful occurrences. It is a combination of parameters fundamental to any practice invested in the development of new modes of experiencing. It is a set of enabling constraints that would generate directionality and set in motion a series of relational fields. It is by nature irrevocably more-than human and collaborative.

“Since the goal was to collaboratively “catalyze” movement toward the emergence of the new, the roles of techniques of relation would not be to “frame” the interaction in the traditional sense. The role of the techniques of relation was to create conditions conducive to the event earning its name as event”⁵⁶

A technique requires practice and repetition, something that is carried by us and that carries us, activated again and again. There is a technique for drinking tea, for bodies moving together, for entering a lecture hall, for making books and paper. We craft techniques to engender a motion. The repetition is a positively generative movement, from which emerges a certain familiarity that allows for an attunement to the eventful ramifications it will spawn.

“A technique, in all creative practices, from dance to art to writing and reading, involves practiced repetition and intensive exchange” “Techniques as we understand them do not depend exclusively on the content of practices but move across their respective processes at the site of their potential multiplication”⁵⁷

In this passage, Manning also indicates that techniques gain at behind activated across a number of fields, being interpreted, borrowed, and remodelled toward an intersectional practice. This exchange and translation among relational techniques is of course not to calque practices onto each other and merge their domains into a homogenized field. Instead, it pushes the inquiry into a generative hybridity and stimulates the proliferation in experience provoked by the activation of techniques across registers. Being attentive to the moments of co-combination between apparently antagonistic fields of practice also reiterates that processes of knowing and knowledge

⁵⁶ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act : Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota, 2014), 92.

⁵⁷ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act : Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, 94.

creation can happen at the most unexpected sites. A technique for dance might momentarily resonate with the emergent crafting of a concept, building together a new creative encounter.

However, Manning warns us not to confuse a technique with art itself, but rather think of it a seed that can grow into unforeseen experiences. A technique is at its most effective and taps into its speculative potential when it exceeds its repetitive rigor and allows a shift into uncharted fields of sensing. By attuning to the ever-changing ecology into which it is activated, a technique is cleaved to leave the way open for technicity, receptive to the forces of its more-than. According to Manning, this moment in which the shift from technique to technicity happens is where the process appears as such, in its uneven and shifting topography. It is where we touch art, as a fortuitous moment of excess that is not outlined in advance, nor easily defined.

“Technique and technicity coexist. Where technique engages the repetitive practice that form a composing body – be it organic or inorganic – technicity is a set of enabling conditions that extract from technique the potential for co-composition” “Think technicity as the process that stretches out from technique, creating brief interludes for the more-than of technique, gathering from the implicit the force of form” “ Technicity, the art of the event”⁵⁸

Manning adds that when technicity touches to the surplus and unregistered potential of technique, it brings to the forth a quality of felt-experience. This ineffable occasion is always hard to formulate through the patterns of language. We have to keep in mind that the rigor of repetition and practice that the development of techniques requires does not equal methodology. They compose an alternative that allows us to leave behind the strictures of the method and its obsession for reproducibility and measurable results.

⁵⁸ Erin Manning, *Always more-than one : Individuation's Dance* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2013), 33.

This is not method: it is more dynamic than method, open to the shift caused by repetition, engaged by the ways in which bodies change, environments are modulated and modulating, and ecologies are composed. The painter-paint-canvas ecology is an ever-changing one, from sitting to standing to looking to feeling to touching to seeing⁵⁹.

The challenge at hand would be to explore with rigour a field of sayability in the making, while leaving the door open for the more-than to fold into. To be rigorously experimental and speculative, always pragmatically anchored. In the context of conlanging and the political perspectives its practice undergird, how could we conceive of language construction as a set of techniques allowing for unexpected moments of technicity. Can we craft techniques to tap into the speculative power of language and accept the unpredictability of such an endeavour? Could we think of grammar rules as conduits toward unpredicted relational compositions, as enabling constraint for a different language/body encounter?

Language as Technique

In his book *Semblance and Event*, Brian Massumi structures an argument that become essential to understanding language first and foremost through its speculative potential. His conceptual move allows us to connect the dots between an account of language as relational technique and the rigorous practice of techniques leading the way towards occasions of technicity. This conceptual arc is build in order to support the alternative approach to conlangs as open-ended creative practices that this thesis is trying to build. By calling upon Massumi's reasoning of language as technique, I hope to tie the phenomena of constructed languages with Manning's account of art as

⁵⁹Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*.

way. It will equip us for a thinking of conlangs as emergent fields of sayabilities, with the capacity to invoke truths of prospective futurities.

The first step taken in this direction is to refute the common understanding of language as a referential operation, as a system of signs that can faithfully be associated with specific bodies across situations. We have to relinquish a thinking of the linguistic as chain of significations qualified by a symmetrical quality between language and its sense completion. Because signs do not exist as representations or references of the sensible world, because they operate with their own consistencies and intensities, there can be no pretence of one-to-one correspondence between words and things.

Building on James theory of the “meaning of truth”⁶⁰, Massumi explains that in most instances, the expectation for sense completion generated by language, its validation into bodies, is left unsatisfied. The majority of utterances won’t find echo in actual sensation. Therefore, the basic manoeuvres of language have much more to do with demonstration than with reference. Words, even in the very few cases where they do terminate in the sensible, exercise a role of indication. “Words pointing toward, in active tending, more than they pin down, in logically fixed designation”⁶¹ Thus, what bounds the linguistic into the world is its capacity to demonstrate, to point toward and indicate, more than terming and fixing.

Nevertheless, the author reminds us that there can be no such a thing as pure demonstration. A seamless demonstration of bodies and sensations by language is impossible, because language

⁶⁰ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurent Arts*

⁶¹ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurent Arts*, 119

always operate from within an incommensurable field of shared presuppositions, of expectations and implicit relations. For an utterance to do its work, for language to effectively carry across, there is a need to truncate and extract from the cloud of minute details. “It is necessary to skip potential intermediaries all the more concerted, in order to go anywhere with language”⁶² This skipping operation is fundamental to language.

Since the function of language is not referential and pure demonstration is impossible, Massumi pursues his reflection by arguing that language is fundamentally speculative before everything else. The demonstrative force of language most often uncompleted in the sensible world is what cements its proclivity for the speculative. Language has the ability to mobilize virtual lines of experience sensing, foretracing ahead of their termination. It predates the unfolding of an event in the actual. When taking the time to decorticate the movement of language across signs and bodies, it restates its appetite for the unforeseen. It resituates its incommensurable creative potential. In this capacity, language becomes a technique, resorting on its ability of pointing toward and skipping intermediaries, for producing truths of alternative futures. A technique for drafting new world-linings and activating virtual events. The following excerpt reinforce Massumi’s position on language’s speculative capacity :

“This is the power of language to perform virtual events of foretracing. Its speculative-pragmatic power to produce *a* truth. It is a directly performative power, compelling without the crutch of the programmatic. It is an invocative power. A “magic” power to invoke relational realities into world-lining. What language handles, as a technique of existence for the production of virtual events, are not semantic contents. Neither are they are codes of content or syntaxes for content formation. Nor symbolic meaning. Nor metaphorical associations. What language as a technique of existence

⁶² Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurent Arts*, 62

processes, directly and immediately in lived abstraction, is the eventful singularity of vitality affects, and the mode of their mutual transformative inclusion in generic affective tonalities.”⁶³

When mobilizing its speculative force, tapping into its inherent capacity for tending forward, language becomes a technique for imagining new modes of relational encounter. It is towards this understanding of language’s potential I wish conlanging practices would shift their operations.

Conlanging as Technique

A long distance has been covered since the survey of Perterson’s account of what art might be. When thinking with art as *way*, we forsake the attachment to the object and the making/spectating linear division of time. This processual approach lies in the manner and the mode, not in the objecthood. Transformation into market value and institutional recognition should not be part of what constitute an effective definition of art. The interest of any practice, conlanging included, shouldn’t lie in the application of a reproducible method, in the establishment of clear guidelines for production and evaluation. Manufacturing a collection of universals and rules, compiled in a grammar, doesn’t participate in the experimental rigor characteristic of an ethico-asethetic endeavour. Nevertheless, it doesn’t mean that the construction of languages is not taken as a serious activity. On the contrary, it is taken seriously anew in every iteration.

Creating languages is an artistic practice because it can be folded back into the world and inflect prospective ecologies. What is generated can be taken along the way, and further expanded in a plurality of directions. Conlanging is a technique for crafting malleable concepts that don’t need an uttering subject for finding completion into the sensible world. Conlanging is a technique for

⁶³ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurent Arts*, 173

unexpectedly encapacitating forthcoming truths. In its capacity of technique, when properly honed, trained and rehearsed, the rigorous practice of tongue crafting can be cracked open and unfold into interludes of technicity.

This of course requires a reorganization of what it means to create naturalistic languages and whether or not other goals might be foregrounded. Can phonemes, morphemes and grammatical cases be put to work as the shades and hues of a shifting sentence-composition? Can we extrude the material and plastic qualities of a field of sayability? When shifting toward art as *way*, the activity of language creation becomes a conduit towards new modes of existence, a tool for speculatively foretracing how else language might become.

CHAPTER THREE

A Rigour of Experimentation

In the first chapter of my thesis, I offered an overview of the field of constructed languages, its history and its methodology. Then, I demonstrated how this approach is rooted in the theoretical tradition of scientific linguistics and highlighted the political implications of upholding such model. Finally, I suggested that by reconfiguring the practice around a conception of pragmatics inherited from Deleuze and Guattari's theory of expression, the field could issue radically open and creative propositions. The second chapter investigated the question of art and process. I showed how the current discourse on art and constructed languages, and the desire it formulates to be taken seriously as an artistic practice, is mostly preoccupied with status and institutional recognition. As an alternative, I detailed a process philosophical conceptualization of art. This approach on artistic practices doesn't understand the object as central component, nor operate with a linear conception of time. Rather, it emphasizes the ecologically participative propensity of every practice.

This chapter's goal is situated somewhere else. It first endeavours at circumscribing the ethical implications inherited from the philosophy of expression of Deleuze and Guattari. Then, building on this ethico-aesthetic paradigm, it functions as an inventory of practices and techniques I experimented with throughout the last years. The account made of these techniques is not a detailed procedure, nor a precise description of how I encountered materials and performed gestures. It is more of a landscape of feelings and sensations, of notes and thoughts that diagram part of the experiments.

The central interrogation that propels this chapter remains how to pragmatically engage with the creative force of languages in the making. This series of propositions is actively looking for entry points in this practice, while trying to shed the methodological patterns normally associated with constructed languages.

The investigation focuses on the material components of languages in the making and questions what it means to build on this plasticity alongside the creation of characters, at a site where bodies and signs aren't yet cemented in their respective roles and where the shifting potential is still strong. How does a language in the making lives beyond the ink and paper on which it is printed, how does it moves through sounds, bodies and gestures? The following inventory of practices gives some insights on the interrogations and reflections behind the material component of my thesis. However, it is not meant to offer a pre-constructed reading of the work, nor does it pretend to demonstrate the concepts discussed in the preceding pages. Rather, I hope it offers a series of launching pads, which might eventually grow into their own speculative processes.

On Ethics and Aesthetics

Brian Massumi, translator of *A Thousand Plateaus*, wrote extensively about Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of expression. In *Like a Thought*, the philosopher gave a precise account of what is implied in an ethics of expression and underlined central interrogations:

“It is a basically pragmatic question of how one *performatively* contributes to the stretch of expression in the world – or conversely prolongs its capture. This is fundamentally a creative problem. Where expression stretches, potential determinately emerges into something new.”⁶⁴

A philosophy of expression, as conveyed by Massumi, is both an ethical and aesthetic venture. In the case of language, a care for ethics would mean tuning to the emergence of atypical expressions in a given milieu and participating in an unyielding attention toward radical difference. It means contributing to the stretch of expression toward the limits of agrammaticality, to elaborate tensors from within the language. The force of the agrammatical resides in its capacity to momentarily evade capture and unsettle the major configuration, to exist outside the rules that constitute an acceptable syntactic enunciation. “It is the ideal characteristic of a line placing grammatical variables in a state of continuous variation.”⁶⁵ To move forward with this proposition means to engage in a rigor of experimentation, an inherently aesthetic endeavour that partakes in an ethics of emergence. An activity where the central issue is not one of personal and moral responsibility.

Across her extensive work on neurodiversity, Erin Manning provided us with very precise examples of how language can morph creatively toward new modes of saying, emphasizing its

⁶⁴ Brian Massumi, “Like a Thought” in *A Shock to Thought*, ed. Brian Massumi, p.XXII

⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, 99

plastic qualities. In *An Ethics of Language in the Making*⁶⁶, she describes how it is often difficult for autistic folks to practice the subtraction operation necessary to extract meaning from sound, rhythm and environment. According to Manning, this polyphone connectivity so characteristic of autistic perception allows to tune-in more easily to the more-than of language. To tap in the yet-unknown potential of a field of sayability. In this capacity, language becomes a sensing practice that is inherently relational. Less concerned with the hindrances of the grammar, and fully embracing the irregularities of a language in the moving. The writings of autistic people are pragmatically engaged with this ethics of relation, with this ecological approach to language that takes in the excess of its experiential composition. It entails developing an empathy that is not human centered, but attentive to the world in its emergence.

This account made by Manning requires a radical attention to the minoritarian tendencies emerging across instantiations of the major language. The forces of the major and the minor co-exist; they are two treatments, two usages of the same language. “Minor languages do not exist in themselves: they exist only in relation to a major language and are also investments of that language for the purpose of making it minor.”⁶⁷The mutually reciprocal tension between the major and the minor in any language, its necessary co-composition within a social and political field, is what enables the creation of atypical expressions. One of the central criticisms Deleuze and Guattari formulate against scientific linguistics is that it never ceased to operate from a mode of the major, preoccupied with binary modes of understanding and arboreal categorization. From what we have seen so far, the current methodologies in constructed language are equally invested

⁶⁶ Erin Manning, *Always more-than one : Individuation's Dance* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2013), 149

⁶⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi ,106.

in these majoritarian tendencies. If the crafting of atypical expressions, the agrammatical, is the ideal treatment of language for an ethics of relation and emergence, then how could a process of language creation shift its focus away from the creation of a strict grammar?

It brings us to a problematic question: Where is this fundamental tension located in a constructed language? How can we account for the boundless complexities of the minor crawling its way through the major? There is no such a thing *natural languages in the real world* as opposed to constructed languages in fictional worlds. Every creative process is already in and of the world. The goal is consequently to forsake this pretence to isolation and get out of the pristine system. Therefore, I would suggest putting the germinating system to work right from the beginning, before its coagulation into systematic patterns. To graft at its very core an apparatus of active serialization that will contribute to its deterritorialization, opening a diagrammatic process that will cause a resonance across a plurality of consistencies. In the thread, in the clay, in movement, in the ritual. For the language in the making to move as a chromatic linguistics, it has to be put to work. This will facilitate a translation across consistencies and speeds, pragmatically speculating on the potential reinvention of the signs into new mediums. The aim: to jump from one substance to another, to recompose its forms of content and expression across registers.

Tea as practice

Every tea session carries a unique potential for aesthetic encounter. Through the ritualized procedures, the soaked leaves will open themselves to an endlessly renewed relational composition. The choice of the leaves, their origin, the process of production, how they were stored... Small leaves, big leaves, rolled leaves, chopped leaves, powder, bag?

Carefully choosing the vessels, it requires feeling the history they carry on one's hand and one's lips. Is it a slightly rough stoneware, or smooth and shiny porcelain? A cardboard cup with a chewed-up rim? Chinese, Japanese, English, Russian, Moroccan tradition? Second Cup? The shape of the vessel will immensely affect the technique, the grip, and the pour. Maybe you really want to impress your teacher with a full set of beautifully crafted ceramics, or maybe you're far from home and only have this single cheap pot. The vessels are moving through the times of tea, slowly seasoning with every brew, taking on its colours, tastes and textures.

Where are we sitting? In a tea salon, in one's living room? At the office, on a park bench, on the sofa, on the ground. How is the company? A first date, a book, your brother, a loved one forever the best tea partner, an empty chair. Is it a gossipy tea, is it a Netflix tea, a write your damn thesis tea? A postpone the hunger tea. A let's-move-to-China tea, a I-am-too-poor tea. A I-need-to-something-with-my-hands tea that slowly becomes a break-up tea. Some of the most difficult conversations can be facilitated by perfectly timed tea encounters.

Every brew is its own liquid fulfilment. First brew, second brew, third brew. A full liter of boiling water. Ratio of leaves, how many grams can you spare? Time flying and leaves opening, sharing their aromas and perfumes, drenched. Smell the leaves. Did you forget the water in the teapot

while the page became a chapter? Maybe the leaves already gave everything and are now barely colouring the water. Maybe you waited too long to brew this precious green tea you brought back from far away, and its freshness faded. Don't hold on too long to your green leaves. The colours are shifting, from a dark emerald green to a de-saturated yellowish. A deep amber, an aged pitch dark, a warm chestnut. The tastes taste different shades of white, green, yellow, red and black.

Every sip moves with its own choreography, depending on the temperature of the liquid, how full the vessel is, how far from the table I am sitting. A thirsty sip, a long-awaited-for sip, a bored sip, a daydreamt sip. A soaked moustache sip. Is the tea so hot you can only smell? Has it gone cold and morose? Maybe you had so much already you really need to pee but there is already someone in the bathroom. A no more sip sip. Are your legs sore from all this sitting? Are you bored and irritated? Is it time to get more water because the first kettle wasn't enough for all that cake you have to eat? Sipping the sips, one sip at the time.

On Language Creation

Despite my critical stance toward current methodologies in constructed languages, I firmly believe that the activity of crafting tongues is a rich process that can lead to experiments with unanticipated modes of relationality. It allows the shaping of concepts directly from the core of the language, making perceptible and tangible associations of ideas that could have seemed unreachable otherwise. It is a way to understand art as something that puts things back in movement and transform substantives into verbs.

In order to experiment with alternative entry points to processes of language creation, I decided to operate with a different set of basic premises. One of these conditions would be to nullify the necessity of a speaking population as first constraint for coherent and substantiated linguistics system. In the past year, I tried to create a system of signs that is not made for, nor originates from an enunciating individual. A communication apparatus that is not tied nor designed for a clear uttering subject. At the core of this undertaking is a curiosity for how a sequence of accidents, of apparently foreign elements colliding into plastic deterritorialization, might propel into the actual a series of recognizable and reproducible signs. Therefore, instead of beginning with a thorough selection of phonemes, subsequently organized into morphemes and syntax, I tried to incorporate an accidental component, using shapes, textures and tones as a generator. This approach had the advantage of putting at the foreground a series of elements that is normally relegated to a subordinate plan of the language phenomenon. What is normally understood as a mere vessel or surfaces to convey meaning would instead be a central element in the process of sign creation. Here is what I did:

I selected the most eclectic bunch of second-hand ceramics from the thrift store. I smashed this assortment of mugs, jars, lamps, snail plates and carafes into incongruous pieces. I shattered the vessels with a hammer, keeping every single shard of broken pots. I organized the fragments into flattering compositions, carefully displaying the intricate details of a cup's glaze, or the concavities of a broken lid. I photographed these accidental topographies, flattening and extracting clear lines from the newly composed landscape of the vessel, looking for traces of the signifying regime to come among the shattered pieces of a cheap teapot.

From these new images, I isolated a string of characters that would serve as basic unit for the building of a visual inventory. This series of aesthetically pleasing and coherent curvatures would be used to compose an asemic writing system⁶⁸. It would have been easy to give these new images a clear role, to clarify a methodical and semantic articulation - a letter, a sound or a concept that could be configured again into a new enunciation. However, while these characters are meant for assemblage and complex compositions, they are not infused with systematic meaning. I chose to suspend this operation for a moment and let the characters oscillate on the shivering boundary of signification, deprived of an established signifier and full of unresolved tension.

For these characters to expand and stretch their potential, I engaged in a rigorous practice of redundancy, which as we have seen, is a fundamental operation of language. Forcing the images to move across machinic assemblages and collective assemblages of enunciations, the signs are reproduced, stamps, printed, drawn, and embroidered, maculating paper, fabric and leather. Leaping across the substances and letting the characters make one with every new surfaces, the

⁶⁸ Peter Schwenger: *Asemic, the Art of Writing* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2019)

signs take on fresh circumstantial meanings. It negotiates with the known codification of the page, a structure made of papers, inks, colours, composition and margins. From the action of repetitive reproduction of characters across materials, a set of patterns and tendencies slowly starts to emerge, building on its material components to compose a grammar of things. Something to secure us on the sheet and establish a semblance of readability.

On Paper Making

An enormous container, filled with hundreds of liters of pulp. Beaten vegetal fibre, suspended in water, ready to be caught and bound into new shapes. Cotton, linen, hemp, abaca, kozo... A vat containing a world of upcoming surfaces, lending their imminent flatness to be filled with textures, images and words: folded, cut, printed, circulated, deciphered. Clasp the frames of moulds and deckles that are much older than me, of beautifully tired mahogany, slightly rotten and rusted, which already pulled hundreds of thousand of sheets.

A chain of gestures, an expertise of movements and observation, trained and repeated, centuries after centuries, with so little change. Calm and elegant, moving through the same movement papermakers moved through for generations. The thickness of the pulp, the nature of the fibre, its length and composition, will shift the speed; bend the choreography of the sheet. A dance almost extinguished, as the knowing bodies are getting older, taken by different velocities.

A sheet belongs to the weight of the water; there is no paper without it. It is everywhere in the substance, on my body, on the floor, on the walls. In the summer's heat, my sweat falls in the vat and mixes with the pulp. In the cold of the winter, my skin constricts and tightens when diving into the glacial mixture. I can feel the paper in my shoulders and my knees, in my back and my joints. With every sheet the body changes: new pains, new muscles, sheets and sheets and sheets, trading my youth and health for the confidences of the trade.

Hand papermaking allows for a randomization of the fibres, moved, shaken, defloculized in the mould. Sheets of handmade paper can be folded and torn in any way, as their smooth surface extends in every direction without a structured path. The machine-made paper has a clear

direction, a grain, it has been organized and striated, the agitator of the apparatus allowing for a single direction. No paper machine has been able to reproduce effectively the co-composing body of the vat-pulp-mould-craftsmen.

As the water drains through the screen of the mould, the calm lake of pulp steadily solidifies, becoming like freshly fallen snow. Longhaired arms caked with coloured pulp, catching the fibres as it ripples down from my elbows. Drying compacting changing skin into paper. Moving back and forth, dense water flowing and getting thinner, every small shift in the configuration will be read in the sheet.

As the sheets hovers between liquid and shape, the dimensionality of paper, its thickness and fragility, is more palpable then ever. It is said among papermakers that a sheet is like a child. It will forever bear the traces of its infancy, engrained in its flesh, every strained fibre fixed in time. The sheet is so extremely delicate, as it still hesitates between fluid and solid state. It is impossible to keep it perfectly safe, to protect it from creases, thumb marks, dust, bad formation, clumsy pressing, lumps, etc.

Under the right conditions, this series of movements will give birth to a sheet that might survive for a thousand years. What text, what image is worth such a lifespan? Tightly bound fibres, for new eternities, magnificent planes begging for the marking ink. Irresistible living vehicles.

Notes on Tango

Learning tango is often compared to learning a language. For a quick trip to a foreign country, you can buy a book of basic sentences, allowing you to find your way to the bathroom and order a drink. However, if you want to engage in a conversation, create your own sentences and improvise in that language, you need to learn the grammar. Of course, one path is longer than the other, and might involve more frustrations and stepping on toes. However, it is said to be much more rewarding.

In both these methods, when applied to learning and teaching tango, there is a clear notion of how a body should move and communicate intentionality to another. The details of the teaching methods will emerge from a variety of factors. The importance given to the cultural legacy from Argentina, the school's philosophy, how the teachers themselves learned, etc. This composition of influences will determine the type of music that is played, the way to behave with other dancers, what kind of movement is allowed and which one is frowned upon. In this capacity, teaching tango means crafting grammatical bodies.

I believe these methods have caused a significant calcification of the creative potential of this dance. The history of tango is rich and complex, and is worthy of respect. However, it currently occupies too much place in our contemporary communities and impedes prospective movements to unfold. Even though there is still a potential for creativity and exploration from within this stratified organization, I feel a need to go back to the basics of tango's relational power. How can tango force a rupture with the captured form it is caught in and escape towards other ways of moving?

Here is an attempt at distilling a series of fundamental enabling constraints for relational movement:

1. An elastic embrace, something that is not constricted to faciality, face-to-facedness, or torsos touching. The embrace acts as an agreed-upon measure of contact, whether we are two, three, or a room full of dancers. I propose: the shape of the embrace is only an anecdote, locating lines of push and pull, generating a proliferation of directions. Relying on the visual field, or the tip of the fingers, can also be a very potent embrace, in a different way than the arms and the torsos. An embrace can reach a 360 degrees prehension, where the backs of both dancers are as receptive as their front.

2. Tango depends on a sharing of weight, a constant attention to the shifting masses. This allows for the call to movement that is undertaken between dancers. What happens when we sense the weight elsewhere than in the frontality of the two? A trusting-listening between two centers that agree to move together. Standing on one foot as a doorway forward and toward several anywheres. There is this imperceptible moment of regrouping, of “neutral point” that gives us the recharged potential to relay into a new direction. This aligned shift is the basic step of any tango. The quality of the ever-shifting embrace contributes to this alignment. From the combination of a plastic embrace and aligned centers is born what we call connexion. Connexion will circumscribe the moving shared space, the coherent distance between the bodies. The classical configuration involves two standing and facing axis, but many formal experiments (contact tango, power tango, etc.) has proven these limitations to be arbitrary. In any incongruous situation our bodies happen to reinvent the necessary path.

3. A desire to maximise comfort and the communicative potential. Care and trust between the dancing bodies should always be a concern when moving together. I think this is where technique might come into play, to facilitate a more comfortable and pleasant way for bodies to come together. What is the most comfortable way for my body to realize a pivot? How can I invite a partner toward a new interval in the most caring way? Is there a way for us to find new zones of connectivity for our bodies to engage with? To facilitate the crossing, the end of the journey is always contained in the very beginning of the movement. A direction will be given, a vector containing the *A and Z* coordinates (as opposed to *A to Z*). It is a proposition for a voyage from a shared departure and a speculative point of arrival. It offers the whole journey as an opportunity for variation and multiple interventions. By highlighting the coordinates of the next interstice, I am enhancing the availability of our communicative apparatus to emerging shifts. A confidence immanent to the shared notion of the projected direction, which can be overtook at any moment.

4. The question of roles is a thorny one. It has been thought for a while that allowing gendered bodies to take on a different role than the one biologically assigned to them is the paroxysm of radicalism in tango. Its is true that facilitating role change might help making more comfortable bodies that don't associate with heteronormative spaces, especially in LGBTQ+ communities. However, it is not enough for a renewal of potential and creating room for radical expression and research. Beyond changing roles, there is a critical necessity to understand that a taken direction doesn't emerge solely from a volitional leader. It grows in an ecology... emerges from the previous step, the quality of the floor, the musical landscape, the space allowed on the dance floor, the pain in my knees, our difference of height and weight, etc. However this doesn't mean that there is a negation of a proposing role. Thinking of roles as emergent, not defined by gender, shape of embrace or any other recurrent convention. By truly engaging with this potential shift,

with the “change of roles”, we are both entering a stream of immediacy and availability. We are letting go of the need for a definite and strict binary, and coming back to a continuum. For the interval to reach its full potential and open itself to a multiplicity of novel directions, for a reinvention of the moving bodies, it has to have the capacity to be reconfigured at any moment.

By retaining this set of constraints as basic elements to build upon, I think we make space for emerging expressions in our dance. They aim at recovering maximum potential from the fleeting moments of intersections. The next step would be to reflect upon the possibilities it offers in a pedagogical setting. What vocabulary can convey effectively a set of concepts that might appear extremely foreign to traditional approaches? Can we still use tango as a valid substantive to describe what we’re doing here?

On Books

A sheet, a page, a bound volume, an edition, a library, a collection, a book published in many volumes, digital data on your screen, 10010010, hand-made, industrial, elusive and plural. What could be thought as an easily and tangible concept, with clear material boundaries, reveals itself to be quite slippery. Can the idea of the book encompass many scales, qualities and materialities all at once? In fact, the potential ramifications of the substantive “book” and its circumscription by a fixed definition are of little importance. It is however absolutely intoxicating to reflect upon the vertiginous quantity of processes and procedures mobilized around the vague boundaries of what we understand to be a book.

Books are leaky objects, draining from before the words and spilling way further than the lines. An elastic concept that can expand and retract as needed, operating as a juncture node for streams of practices. It is an inherently political device, on multiple levels. The shifting vessel of the book has the power to play a critical part in the flourishing, circulation and transformation of a field of sayability. The book as intellectual property, as “text”, as language and information, but book as paper and leather, as cords and threads, as processes of making something that feels good for the hands. When talking about the book, Deleuze and Guattari said: “There is no difference between what a book talks about and the way it is made.”⁶⁹ What does it mean to take this statement seriously and stretch our thinking of the book toward a body without organ, to a small machine relentlessly connecting with multiple other machines? Beyond conceptualization, how can we materialize it and investigate the plasticity of a rhizome-book. A practice of cohering textuality and bodies in a book-event activated differently every time. From the matrixes of the linotype to the archival striations of the library, the book mutates.

⁶⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi

A book can take many forms, and is of course not tied to the shape of the codex. Binding is only one of the many speeds of the books, one line of velocity. Pamphlets, zines, paperback, hardcover, fine press, library binding, artist books, paper rooms, collectible, multiple. My own approach to making books is however very much informed by the traditions of bookbinding. A studio full of presses and blades, papers and threads. A bunch of these newly made sheets, freshly flatten and accurately selected. Folded, trimmed, sewn, glued, covered, pressed, tooled, bound all together. The manufacturing of a tome, a codex, a volume. The traditional craft of bookbinding is a very technical realm. It is a legacy of approaches and procedures inherited from countless binders who worked their way toward expert craftsmanship, one cover at the time. Learning the importance of backing the spine in a consistent arc, sewing the headbands with the right core, cooking wheat paste for the leather.

How can we think about hyper technical fields as open practices, rather than strict methods? When fully committed to a craft, when our understanding over materiel is so complete, how do we still attune to shifts and variations, staying receptive to the potential that goes beyond the precisely crafted object, more-than of the book. Therefore, maybe we could extend our thinking of bookbinding as a series of techniques and points of entry. Something that is rigorously repeated, honed and trained. Not a strict method, nor a fixed object. It is rather an array of activities, an ecological coming together with several possible termini, allowing margins of variability and an attunement to the fugitive moments of technicity. It is less about the book as object than about books making themselves. And the making is located just as much in the gluing of the spine then in the sounds of an out loud reading or in the highlighting of a precious passage.

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