

Language

I've struggled with a development in language that several new characters have brought to my table. Two of them have five starting languages. One wants to learn an immigrant tongue.

Too: I've been reading about dice pools. Arnold K, of course, started me, but his thoughts synthesize the fact that I've dug my hands into giant vats of thrift store bulk dice bins and held my brother's big Crown Royal bag of stolen dice and relatively recently played *Kings of Tokyo* and even now remember my time at the family table playing Yahtzee so I recognize in part there's a physical satisfaction I want to chase of throwing ten of the same kind of dice on the table and seeing how many you get.

I also have learned two languages now. I recognize that in both French and Spanish, I have a more than average passing capacity. I recognize a much more distant familiarity with Korean and acknowledge that that language, by dint of its alien alphabet and the distance my life has had from it and its culture, is more difficult to learn. I recognize this would not be true for others. People who spend their life adjacent to Korean culture in television, family context, comics, whatever, have had *exposure*.

Exposure is the means we have of learning language. *Immersion* is constant exposure.

I don't need or want to adjust the starting number of languages of Shadowdark (5! Fuck), but I want to amend them. As it stands, the system puts forward that two Level 1 wizards have walked into the campaign with five or six languages. This is simply a case of oversaturation.

While I can understand that this puts a boon on the wizard class (which lacks in other aspects), I find it oversimplifies the boon in a way that makes future use of the language entirely dependent on the DM. There either are or aren't circumstances when knowing the language of Elder beings is important, and if the DM never presents that opportunity, that aspect of the character can never be leveraged and is never valuable. Boon erased.

In an effort to create both a *reason* for the language and a *means of acquiring more*, I'd like to propose a system change.

As these characters have now admitted academic interests around the nature of acquiring and using language I offer:

Rules for Language

Language is acquired on a scale from unknown to fluent.

Using language requires *comprehension*. If a language is unknown, that's impossible. If language is fluent, comprehension is automatic.

Then there is everything in between.

All characters have a mother tongue. This language is assumed fluent. It is written on a character sheet as the language's name. For Taamog Peets, young goblin, his mother tongue(s) are noted as:

Common
Goblin

All other languages are acquired languages.

To begin acquiring a language, a character must be *exposed* to the language in some way. On exposure and expressed interest, they receive a die of a specific color and size:

d6 everyday language
d6 sister language or dialect
d8 high traffic
d10 tourist language
d12 academy language
d20 alien or otherworldly
d66 buried language

and then note its acquisition on their character sheet using the following notation:

Name of language (x)(y)(z)

where x is the size of the die, y is the number of dice thrown, and z is the increment until the character acquires another die.

At inception, set y and z both to 1.

Further exposure to the language buoys comprehension.

Exposure can be had through conversation, books, screaming matches, magical means, angry howls, signs written in dust, eavesdropping, etc. Exposure can be had randomly—a disemboweled bugbear begging for aid—or it can be sought out—a professor of glyphs holds office hours in Drek's Landing for relatively cheap.

Exposure leads to comprehension via a check. Anytime a character is exposed to a language they are not fluent in, if they wish to understand, they may roll. If any die's face matches its size, comprehension dawns.

For example, our Taamog Peets disembowels an orc, poor girl, and she begs for aid—how random. This is a moment he cares what the orc is saying, the moment he realizes this is a female the age of his mother, that her language is actually not so far away from his own Goblin, and that she's not just a screaming monster who wants to eat his tongue. It's formative. He diligently notes the language on his character sheet as she dies.

Orcish (6)(1)(1)

Peets and party end up in a neighboring village, out of water. No one there is openly hostile so trading can happen, and lo if Peets doesn't end up in front of an orc water-juggist, a female, about the age of his mother. Pretty random. Her first instinct is to speak Orcish to the young goblin, and so Peets rolls comprehension, a 6 on a d6.

He understands *and* expands his capacity *to understand in the future*. So Peets notes:

Orcish (6)(1)(2)

as she refills his waterskin.

If Peets were to have four more successful experiences like this, the note would become:

Orcish (6)(1)(6)

but because $x = z$ [remember, $(x)(y)(z)$], the system slot-machines and becomes:

Orcish (6)(2)(1)

This is when Peets begins to start rolling *two* six-sided die for comprehension, rather than his original one, implying a new threshold or grasp on knowledge of the language. For each die he rolls, he can increment z by the number of successes.

So maybe next time, two.

When Peets reaches:

Orcish (6)(6)(6)

he simply erases all notation and leaves:

Orcish

meaning he needs to make no further checks. All efforts at comprehension and exchange are automatic. The boy fluent.

Thank you, disemboweled mom-age-orc.

Now let's complicate things:

We learn language in interplay with living things and their artifacts.

Characters of friendly or familiar demeanors may pool their language dice and roll together for shared understanding. This is to simulate an effort at companionable exchange rather than simple listening. They must share a second language to do so.

Characters of neutral disposition may add two dice, or if two friendly parties do not share a language, the same.

Characters of hostile disposition will at times go to extra effort to make themselves understood, but can at most add one die.

Any character may be conversed with to expand another character's fluency, including fellows, tutors, shopkeepers, family, and more. They may only help a character's fluency up to their own degree of fluency.

Characters still only increment their fluency up by the number of dice *they* have the capacity to roll. The borrowed dice provide additional chance of success, not additional capacity to learn.

A book, scroll, or communication in a foreign language may be used to increase fluency but has no die to pool. It may be consulted and studied whenever language study might be reasonably successful using the character's own dice.

The information contained therein can only increase a character's dice pool by one. After that, the language gleanings are gleaned. The scroll is tired and read-through. More books, more scrolls, more knowledge must be found.

Conversely though, one could learn language expressly through books, if one had enough.

To account or simulate for the possibility of stray language, overheard snippets, ephemera, or the surprising catharsis of internal thought in relation to the sounds and aspects of the world, at the end of any day, any character may roll once, with one die, on the language study of their choice.

On character creation, besides their mother tongue(s), all characters roll on the languages allocated to their ancestry or class a number of times equivalent to their intelligence. This is done only once. Languages may be chosen as you like from the setting list below.

A longer real world example:

Milo and Fiora are fresh from the academy. Two Level 1 Wizards. Neither is quite sure what they've studied, but Milo is a radical note-taker and Fiora has eager ears. They find business in the North of Corrhéo with a rakish fellow named Kyrel. Against their better judgements, they fall in with him in an effort to secure transport for some ingredients.

In academy, as a Level 1 Milo and Fiora took the exact same classes. They're very good friends. Popolosian, Fae, Yaddish, Goblin, the language of the Rings, and Draconic.

As a result of this twinning, their language charts look as follows to begin:

Popolosian	(10) (1) (1)
Fae	(12) (1) (1)
Yaddish	(10) {1} (1)
Goblin	(10) (1) (1)
The language of the Rings	(12) (1) (1)
Draconic	(20) (1) (1)

Both of their intelligence is 17, but intelligence is different than intelligence *applied*. Each rolls the die indicated for each language seventeen times and their relative learnings begin to separate.

Milo

Popolosian	(10) (1) (3)
Fae	(12) (1) (1)
Yaddish	(10) {1} (6)
Goblin	(10) (1) (3)
The language of the Rings	(12) (1) (3)
Draconic	(20) (1) (2)

Fiora

Popolosian	(10) (1) (5)
Fae	(12) (1) (3)
Yaddish	(10) {1} (7)
Goblin	(10) (1) (3)
The language of the Rings	(12) (1) (3)
Draconic	(20) (1) (1)

Milo found particular success studying Yaddish. The boy just likes ants. The language of the Fae escapes him somewhat.

Fiora on the other hand, had different results. She exceeds Milo in her studies of the Yaddish people, but can't get her head around Draconic outside its basic conceits.

Remember, these are wizards, so studying languages isn't their only world.

Fast forward. They fall into conversation buying food for the road with a pair of berrylmen traders. The wide-set traders back-and-forth with each other quite a bit, the two academicians look at each other. *What are these words they're hearing?*

It's enough to pique their curiosity.

Then they realize it's everywhere.

The berrylmen are everywhere, selling goods, offering tips, swapping stories.

Both add:

Ribbish, language of the Berrylmen (8)(1)(1)

to their language chart.

But Fiora can't get it out of her head that she wants to know the language of Dragons, and doesn't. She's become a student of what she doesn't know.

They find a bargeman willing to try a narrow strait of the Silt Salt Sea for an exorbitant fee. Kyrel cracks booze jokes about how dry it is here. Fiora stares nervously into the silt. Milo distracts himself from the way the boat grates in the moving sand by falling in with the berrylmen barge-runner, asking a lot of questions: how do you say this, what do you call that? The Berrylmen speaks Common too, so the exchange is easy.

He's tickled to educate. He's making good money on this run after all.

Milo and the berrylman pool their dice in the conversation.

They share 9d8, one for Milo's and 8 for the bargeman's fluency. Milo rolls. At least one 8 falls. It's enough. He updates his chart with new knowledge.

Ribbish, language of the berrylman (10)(1)(2)

Thus language is used for language to be learned.

Design Notes:

This system change, I believe accomplishes the following:

- 1) It admits to the fact that language takes time.
- 2) It engenders characters to seek out fluent characters as these are the best means of learning.
- 3) It provides opportunity to consult books, find books, add new books to their inventory.
- 4) It encourages friendly language exchange but admits that even getting screamed at in Goblin is going to teach you something about Goblin, or hearing the cry of a Dragon overhead might be a moment of interpretation and communication and learning, rather than just more DM atmosphere.
- 5) It gives the DM another numerical aspect of the character sheet to attack with discombobulating or mind-altering magics. An enemy mage who makes the mind fragile by disrupting language skills is suddenly attacking character values they've worked hard to earn.
- 6) It takes language valuation out of the hands of the DM and puts it into the characters' hands. A character with five fluent languages on their sheet is simply more work for the DM to find reasons to provide circumstances where the language is a key to a lock (oh, this demon speaks Diabolical and there's only one character who speaks Diabolical! How perfectly plotted!), whereas an evolving language structure encourages player engagement & growth, which encourages them to bring their own character sheet into play which means more reminders that language is important here and its not just a done thing, it's a constant thing. A fluid thing. Always in, always out.

Tidal shit.