

Experiments in Divergent Translation

A Showcase and Test Run of Rhapsodaic

Natanya Norry

Rhapsodaic

- Personal conlang, and the first I've "completed"
- Began as English cypher, whose orthography drove rest of language
- Built from my own systems of correspondences and symbolism
- Retroactive design statements:
 - "Syntactic simplicity combined with semantic fuzziness"
 - "Aesthetic fantasticality"
 - "Preservation of emotional content at the expense of material content"

Grammar Summary

- Free word order with an SVO default, head-initial both word-internally and in adjectival and adverbial phrases
- Stems: Represent individual emotions/clusters of emotions/attitudes towards emotions
 - Divided into 1 group of “attitudinals,” and 8 groups that follow a personally-devised “hero’s journey”
 - E.g. Group S3 refers to experiences of confronting core issues and facing fears:
 - S3F - Fear, anxiety, insecurity, nervousness, deference, shame
 - S3D - Discomfort, wrongness, horror, malice, deception, taboo
 - S3W - Courage, power, influence, boldness, capacity, chutzpah
- Connectors: Connect at least 2 stems to create words; also denote lexical class, noun case, and verb tense
- Diacritics: Classifier system to expand the language to refer to non-emotions
 - Place, Time, Action, Experience, Person, Object, 1st Person, 2nd Person

Handwritten musical notation consisting of a sequence of notes and rests, possibly representing a melody or a specific musical phrase.



I, of enthusiastic joy,

And related to a being of furious strength,

Act in a determined but playful way,

In a place characterized by curious possibilities,

And act in a way that evokes a sense of mischievous rebellion,

Towards the source of a sensation of calm and wise firmness,

That evokes a similarly acted-upon experience of trust in connections.



I'm a shooting star leaping through the sky like a tiger

Defying the laws of gravity

- Queen, "Don't Stop Me Now"



“I, the freshman who everyone thinks looks like a bully for some reason, am giving a speech on following your dreams in the school auditorium, and it’s jostling everyone’s sense of defensiveness and commitment to this idea that they have to respect the authority they feel their peers have over them.”

“Divergent Translation” and the Test Run

Does Rhapsodaic “work”?

- What if ensuring that multiple readers come to similar translations of a given text (“convergent translation”) were not a priority in the design of a conlang?
- Divergent Translation
 - Author writes text in language Y with an intended meaning in language X
 - Translator reads out a meaning that is equally valid in Y, but drastically different from the original in X
 - Insights on the part of both (and other) parties are arrived upon in comparison of the two
- Rhapsodaic designed to facilitate and “dial up” this process
- Text in Rhapsodaic should produce wildly different results in regards to material content when translated into English by different people—what about emotional content?

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- “To test the function of this language outside personal use, I sent a number of participants Rhapsodaic’s full reference grammar and root word dictionary, a short story written in Rhapsodaic, and a short list of English words, and asked each participant to translate the material from one language into the other.”

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- In practice...

Exquisite Corpse

A Rhapsodaic Short Story

- Exquisite Corpse: Each person draws part of a person/monster on part of a piece of paper without seeing the other's parts, until the paper is unfolded and the full person/monster is revealed
- Did this with one paragraph of a Joyce Carol Oates short story
- Seven sentences, six participants + myself (filling in for a seventh who was unable to complete the translation)
 - All participants have some second-language experience; three have conlang learning experience specifically (Toki Pona)

“... ” . “... , , .
... ” . . . “...
... . , - - ? - ,
... .”

“ ”

"I'll see you at home", I lied.. "I, all sweet but strong, will hold you steady, my love—you won't feel afraid, but calm—I'll see the full of who you are, your bold and vibrant love that makes itself exist. Home is bittersweet! It makes me aware. My family is intimidating," They are horrible family, they make me angry. They, of intimate malice, had wrongly indulged themselves in it; that playful, spiteful, lonely thing. Even they, of excess malice, wanted more; shameful, wonderful, wrong. "Though you are consumed by obsession, knowing that you will open your heart fills my heart with joy. Is it so painful? This love fulfills all your needs—I will it so. Ah, it would be enough, if it were up to me, though I sense this is my folly. If you dared to love me, and I loved another — would you ever love again? My friend and you (who is a toxic lover of my friend) is healing your relationship. You are embarrassed and putting something in its place. Mother is concerned (don't want) about it, there's not enough frustration."

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

"We'll go out to a nice field, out in the country here where it smells so nice and it's sunny," Arnold Friend said. "I'll have my arms tight around you so you won't need to try to get away and I'll show you what love is like, what it does. The hell with this house! It looks solid all right," he said. He ran a fingernail down the screen and the noise did not make Connie shiver, as it would have the day before. "Now, put your hand on your heart, honey. Feel that? That feels solid too but we know better. Be nice to me, be sweet like you can because what else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in?—and get away before her people come back?"

Notable Results

- “House” became “family” as a place, and Connie’s “people” are rendered fairly accurately as her “mother.”
- “Looking solid” became “intimidating” in one sentence, and “enough” in another.
- Connie, by whom Arnold is “consumed with obsession,” became the one obsessed in one translation. Connie’s third person pronoun could convey an excess of deep-seated fear, but in another person’s translation, becomes an excess of malice.
- When I translated “what else is there?” I went for something closer to “do you feel unable to make peace with that?”—which then became “would you ever love again?”
- Arnold Friend’s manner of speaking—where Arnold himself is characterized by “malicious intent in love” and his speaking by “dreamlike connection”—was translated as lying, which it is in the original.
- “Feel that?” turned into “Is it so painful?”—another close fit to the story’s context.
- In some ways, this translation acts to “favor” Arnold’s POV even in narrated sections; in other ways, it sides with the narrator and seems to reveal things not said outright (likely because I translated having known the rest of the story).

Process

- My initial expectation was that the bulk of this communication process I intended to facilitate would happen with the translations themselves.
- As it happened, much of that also occurred as part of the process of teaching.
- Novel example translations, unforeseen questions, throwaway explanations for me that made the whole language click for someone else—even with the ideal experiment unfinished, divergent translation got to happen.
- I learned things about myself as well (what I've dubbed my “hyperlexithymia,” my tendency to evaluate emotions on very specific and context-dependent levels, manifests in this language's semantics), but learned them through sharing with other perspectives.

Community, and Teaching a Personal Lang

Rhapsodaic is a fantastically fun language. It reminds me of toki pona in how its fundamental differences from the languages I'm used to forces me to reconsider how I would describe the most basic of concepts. It also acknowledges the fundamental truth that human beings never stop experiencing feelings. You physically must acknowledge your feelings towards something to even begin to convey something about it, and that helps to hammer home the idea that the "cold logical detachment" we usually consider to be "emotion-less" is, itself, an emotion.

My experience could be summed up as

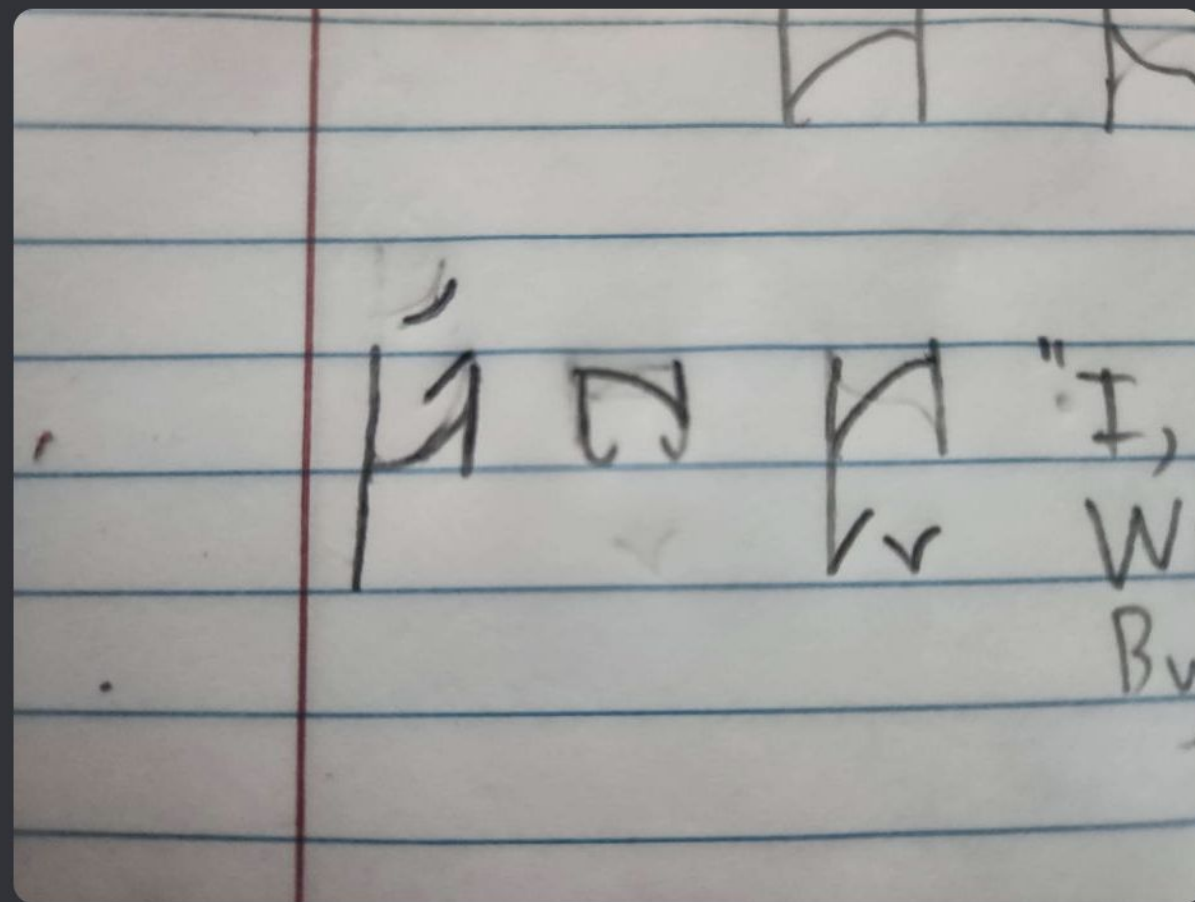
(s1D first person agent s3W) (c1F current action c2W)

I've found Rhapsodaic, while a bit tricky to get down at first, to be a very fulfilling language to study and write in! Learning how to turn emotion into language has been a very fascinating experience, and while being a part of the Rhapsodaic community, it has also been quite a personal one! Being forced to recognize what is going on internally and how it relates to what is going on externally, and making that into language is so absolutely beautiful it makes me want to wax poetic about the whole thing! Learning how to write the language has been an absolute blast. I feel it's like putting pieces of a puzzle together and you always happen to chance upon the next piece that fits perfectly. I would love to see this language take off and to have the world speaking from it's heart. (edited)

Until recently, there was a small forest in front of my work. I'd seen a bald eagle in the tree, deer, raccons, falcons, and what may have been a woodchuck(?) living there. Unfortunately, the entire thing was ripped up in a week. The trees demolished and a woodchipper so large I didn't even know what it was at first was brought in. It had to have been about three acres, maybe more, that was ripped up. The feeling of seeing the ground so scared, knowing that the same was done recently to make the building where I work, and also knowing it was already in the middle of a city where these animals were at risk of getting hit by cars caused just a huge swirl of emotions, anger, sadness, shock, sorrow... but ultimately, I found English doesn't have the right words to say how I feel. I hope I Rhapsodaic does.

Community, and Teaching a Personal Lang

If I've done this right, this should be what it felt like to take my old ADHD medication when I was in a giggly/goofy mood from not taking it









"I, described by my excess of laughter
Will be calmed insightfully
By it, described by simply extant discomfort"

the fact that rhapsodic physically cannot be spoken by a person's body and must be written down reinforces its disconnection from the material world

i wish i knew more about baha'i b/c something something materialism

it feels like there's a connection there

The following table is a generalized summary of the meanings for all 27 stems. Think of the following word lists less as defining the stem and more as collectively pointing towards the meaning of the stem; if the combinations of stage and subdivision or the word lists give you additional ideas, you may incorporate those as well.

Group	Core Meaning	1: Familiar:	2: Dangerous:	3: Wondrous:	Symbols
		Mundane, supportive, and/or within a given boundary	Threatening, harmful, and/or crossing a given boundary	Beautiful, transcendent, and/or beyond a given boundary	
S1	The discovery of something new, the comparison of facts and ideas	Curiosity, interest, realization, uncertainty, learning, contemplation	Analysis, judgment, suspicion, skepticism, graveness, incisiveness	Insight, clarity, understanding, recognition, wisdom, disillusionment	  
S2	The dissonance between what is and what could be, the stoking of longing and resistance	Melancholy, frustration, bitterness, disappointment, loneliness, discontent	Defiance, anger, justice, fixation, obsession, resistance	Freedom, rebellion, vigor, dynamism, possibility, strangeness	  
S3	The confrontation of the core of the matter, the facing of one's fears	Fear, anxiety, insecurity, nervousness, deference, shame	Discomfort, wrongness, horror, malice, deception, taboo	Courage, power, influence, boldness, capacity, chutzpah	  

Oh I am so excited for this since we talked about it a few months ago!!!!

ari im serious this is gonna joker-fy me

Also, we should consider having little events after this speech happens. Since I didnt do the translation, I would like to have some more opportunities to engage with it. Plus, y'all seem chill.

Conclusion

- Languages facilitate the sharing of information: Is there a fixed way they have to do that?
- What facets of experience do languages tend to (de)prioritize? Do we want languages with different priorities?
- What is *gained* in translation?
- Further, certainly more rigorous, experimentation would be instrumental in testing the uses and limits of this strategy,
- But so far, I can strongly recommend divergent translation as a concept for any conlanger interested in experimentation to work with.

Conclusion

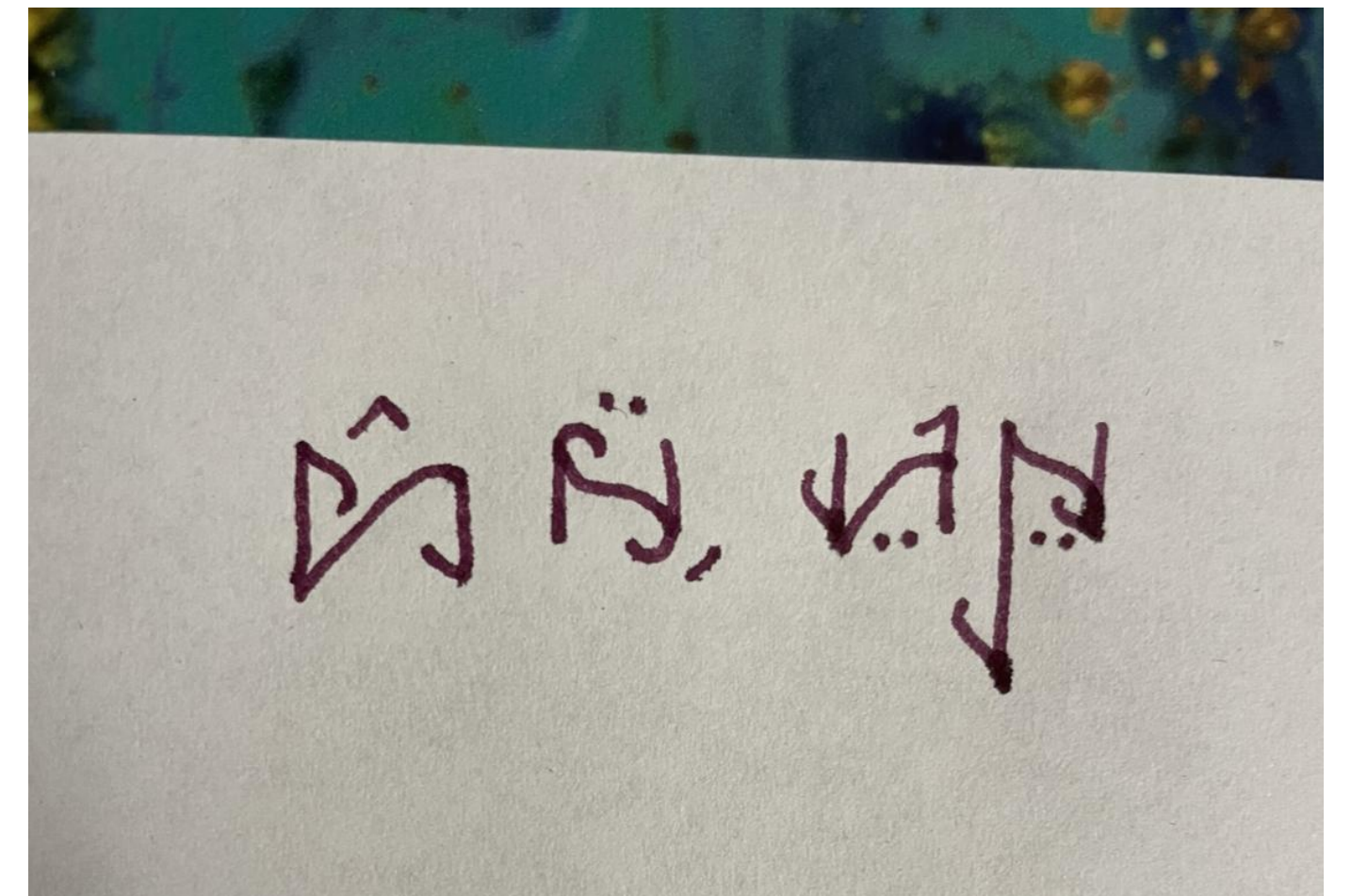
“Maybe every franchise should collapse into a version of itself that makes shareholders nod and shake each others' hands. We should learn to speak in a language that rich people who don't dream can't comprehend.”

- Rhapsodaic isn't that language. At least, not on its own.

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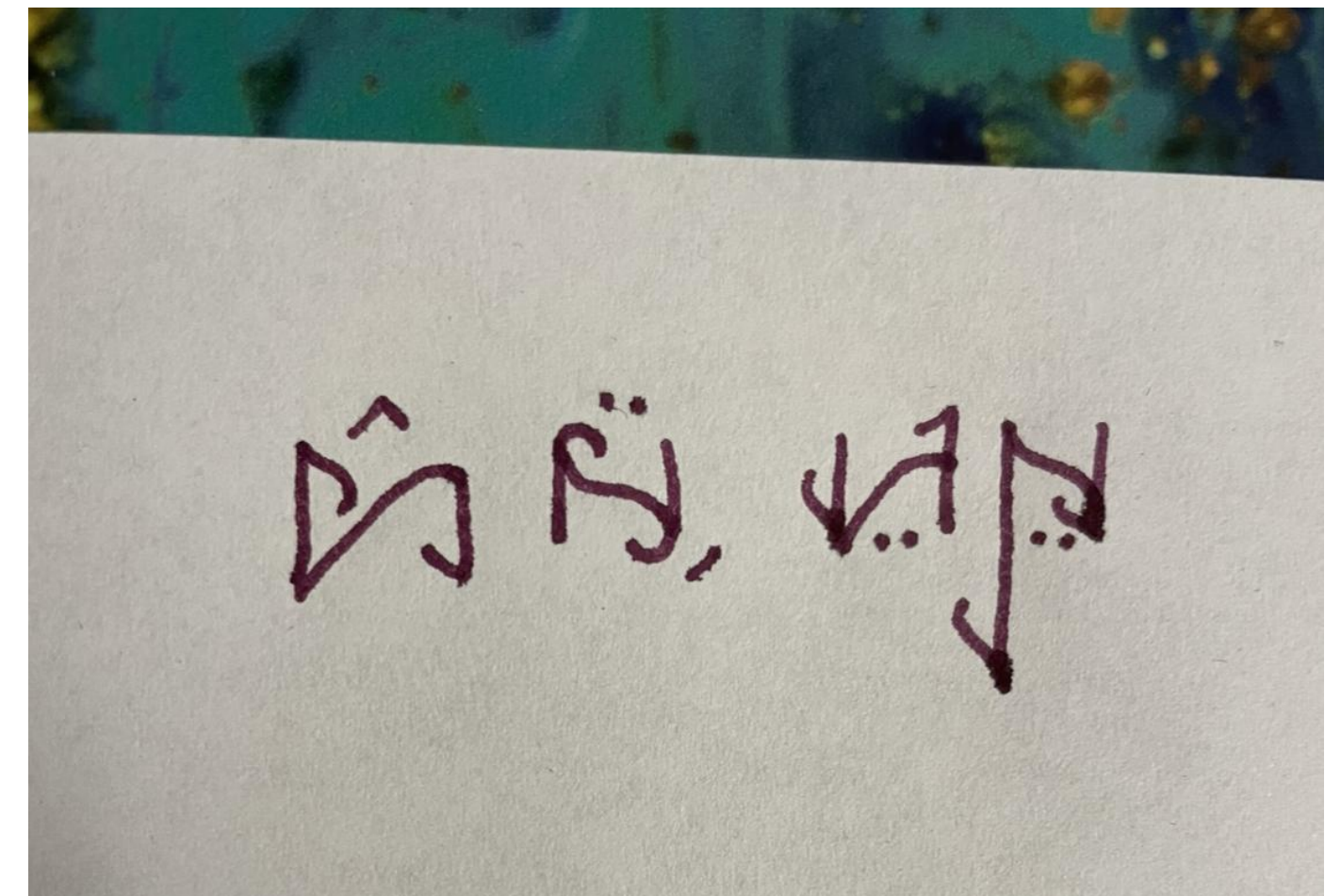
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- Rhapsodaic isn't that language. At least, not on its own.
- “If conlangers create languages like this, new opportunities get opened up by the things we learn.”
- Here, the word for the feeling behind making languages and for the feeling of curiosity about others have the same core—only the details differ.



Thank you very much!

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