The Pragmatics of Toki Pona Across Variable Native Language Backgrounds

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Introduction

When presented with the need to express a new concept, the natural spoken languages of our world employ a number of different strategies. Some, like English and Japanese, abound with loanwords; others, like Icelandic and Polish, generally prefer to reintroduce archaisms or string together compounds of native vocabulary. But what if a language had only a handful of morphemes to draw from? Would that constraint affect the way we think about the world - or the way we implicate?

It is with these questions in mind that Québécois linguist Sonja Lang published the first draft of Toki Pona online in 2001. Toki Pona is a minimalist constructed language, modeled off of the philosophical principles of Taoism, that has come to encompass a core vocabulary of only 137 words (Lang, 2014). This quirk, along with an equally (nominally) simple syntax and phonology, have made Toki Pona exceedingly accessible to learn, and accrued it a substantial following. The language has been the subject of dozens of news articles and academic journals, and its largest online community, *ma pona pi toki pona* (lit. "(a) nice place for Toki Pona"), has thousands of active members from all over the world. Lang has allowed the language to evolve on its own with minimal involvement; the latest Toki Pona dictionary ("*ku*"), for example, contains a list of the most common translations for given English words based on a community survey, rather than hard definitions (Lang, 2021).

Because of Toki Pona's minimal vocabulary, the interpretation of any one word or utterance is usually completely dependent on the context within which it is uttered. Syntactically, this is helped along by an extremely rigid word order and the use of grammatical particles to make it as clear as possible what each word in a sentence individually means. Pragmatically, things get a bit more complicated - especially because Toki Pona is primarily spoken on the

Internet in text chats and voice calls, without the visual aids that accompany most conversations. Furthermore, Toki Pona's diverse speaker base means that many of its regular users come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds where implicatures are constructed in completely different ways.

These demographic peculiarities of Toki Pona - as well as its inception as an *artistic* language, rather than an auxiliary one, that has nonetheless gathered a sizeable corpus of practical users - have led me to wonder if its pragmatics differ substantially from English, and, furthermore, if they are at all influenced by a Toki Pona user's native language background or instead entirely unique. I decided to test this by running a series of five examples (outlined in further detail below) by two self-described fluent Toki Pona speakers.[1] One is a native English speaker from upstate New York, while the other is a native Korean speaker from Busan, South Korea. Adhering to Toki Pona onomastic convention and to respect their anonymity, I will henceforth refer to them as *jan Kon* ("Mx. Spirit") and *jan Eko* ("Mx. Echo"), respectively. Considering Toki Pona's extremely minimal vocabulary, the centralization of its speaker community, and the widespread use of English as an auxiliary medium in Toki Pona spaces, my hypothesis is that, where applicable, Toki Pona pragmatics will largely adhere to that of English convention, no matter a speaker's native background.

Questions

I outlined a series of five scenarios that were designed to analyze a number of unique pragmatic elements across the languages in question of this study. They are as follows. (Note: by

[1] To clarify, the speakers were consulted independently at different times, and were never aware of each other's responses, nor who else was involved in the study.

Toki Pona convention, the only words that are capitalized anywhere in a sentence are proper nouns.)

1. A: tenpo pini la mi moku e kili mute. B: *pona*, *mi moku e kili.* A: n… tenpo pini la mi moku e kili ale.
    a. "I ate a bit of the fruit. *Great, I'll have some too.* Well… I ate all of the fruit."

I asked my respondents whether this exchange, which violates the Gricean maxim of quantity, seemed appropriate or inappropriate on A's part - and, if the latter, what it seemed to imply about A's attitude towards their actions (Grice, 1975). I hoped to determine the scaling of *mute* ("a lot of") with *ale* ("all").

2. A Tokiponist falls down the stairs and hurts themselves. They exclaim, *unpa!*
    a. Toki Pona has several "profane" words: *pakala*, from Finnish *perkele*, is the most common and is explicitly defined as a "generic curse" in Lang's official book; *unpa*, meanwhile, has the not-specifically-vulgar meaning of "sexual intercourse."

I asked my respondents whether a person in such a situation saying *unpa* made any sense, or if it instead sounded like nonsense. I hoped to see if sexual intercourse has the same profane connotations that it does in English.

3. A: tenpo pini la jan Momo li moli e soweli. ni li ike.

    B: tenpo pini la jan Momo li moli ala e soweli. ni li ike.
    a. A: "Momo killed a land animal. It was bad."

        B: "Momo didn't kill a land animal. It was bad."

I asked my respondents whether sentences B made sense compared to sentences A. I hoped to see if verb phrase anaphora worked the same way in response to negation as it did in English, in which sentence B would be nonsensical.

4. jan Mija says, with conviction, “mi sona e ni: jan Jona li akesi” (*I know that Jonah is a lizard*). Jonah is eventually confirmed to not be a lizard. Did Mia lie?

I asked my respondents the above question with the hope of determining whether *sona*, “know,” is used in the same way as in English, or if it instead used similarly to, for example, Akan, where it has the additional meaning of “to believe.”

5. A restaurant manager, jan Sipi, is asking a worker, jan Sana, to try a new menu item. The item is a fruit (*kili*).

   A: o moku e kili!

   B: jan Sana o moku e kili!

   C: *jan Sipi:* jan Sana o, sina ken ala ken moku e kili? *jan Sana:* ken. *(doesn’t eat the fruit)*

   a. In order, these can be translated as “Eat the fruit!” “Sana, eat the fruit!” and “Sana, can you eat the fruit?” (To which Sana responds: “Yes.”)

I asked my respondents first whether situation C made sense on Sana’s part or if it was inappropriate. I then asked whether they would interpret C as a request or a command given the hierarchical social relations at play. Finally, I asked which of the three options presented above seemed to be the most “polite” way of framing a request, and which they would choose in this situation. I hoped to gather information about the formation of direct and indirect requests in Toki Pona and whether their interpretation is dependent on context as it is in English.

Findings

Scenario 1 was unanimously determined to be felicitous and, in fact, not maxim-breaking by part of person A. I found this interesting, as it immediately defied my expectations. The difference in interpretation lies within the scaling of *mute* and *ale*, which, I found, is different than that of *some* and *all* in English. To clarify, there is no direct translation of the English word "some" in Toki Pona. The word *lili* corresponds to "small," but using it in the same syntax as provided in scenario 1 would produce an equally valid meaning of "I eat fruit a bit;" I thereby deemed it inappropriate (Lang, 2014). I settled on *mute* ("many, more") as suggested to me by another fluent Anglophone Tokiponist who I declined to interview for this study in the interest of impartiality.

The complication, then, arises from Toki Pona's minimal syntax. There is no easy or conventional way of differentiating between "I ate some/most of the fruit" and "I ate a lot of fruit," both of which are perfectly valid interpretations of *tenpo pini la mi moku e kili mute*. All of my correspondents assumed the second meaning, producing something akin to the following exchange:

A: I ate a lot of fruit.

B: Oh, great! I'll have some too.

A: Well, I ate all of it.

Unlike my intended English translation (see "Questions" above), this exchange is perfectly felicitous on A's part; "I ate a lot of fruit" does not necessarily implicate that there is any left. This is further complicated by Toki Pona's lack of articles; *tenpo pini la mi moku e kili mute* does not specify what specific fruit is being eaten, and thus the status of how much of the fruit that A and B share has been eaten is left ambiguous until A's second sentence. The

Tokiponists I surveyed all gave A the benefit of the doubt and assumed that they would not violate the Gricean maxim of quantity.

Scenario 2 was unanimously determined to be understandable, but semantically inappropriate. Both respondents understood the intention behind the use of *unpa* but said that it was an improper use of Toki Pona; jan Eko in particular highlighted it as an "anglicism." This leads me to believe that profaneness in Toki Pona is in fact interpreted differently than in both English and Korean. Profane terms in both of those languages are largely related to excrement, genitals, and sexual intercourse (Woo et al., 2022). Toki Pona, meanwhile, has forged its own path; its recent and consciously guided development, as well as a rather universally-minded culture, has swayed it away from assigning taboos to sexual activity in the same way many natural languages have.

The results of Scenario 3 were particularly interesting. The word *ni* in Toki Pona is both a nominal and adjectival demonstrative, as it is in English; it is also used for verbal and propositional anaphora (there is no direct equivalent to English "it"). That said, jan Kon found both sentences to be appropriate, whereas jan Eko agreed that sentence A was appropriate, but said that sentence B was more ambiguous (in their words, "I can interpret them in ways that make sense"). Kon interpreted *ni* to be propositionally anaphoric in both examples; they translated sentence A and B respectively as "It was bad that Momo killed the animal" and "It was bad that Momo didn't kill the animal." As in English, an anaphoric reference of this scale survives negation, unlike verbal anaphora.

Eko, however, was more hesitant. They interpreted sentence A to mean "Momo killed the animal; it was bad," with *ni* referring to the verb phrase "killed the animal." For sentence B, they initially interpreted *ni* to be pronominally anaphoric (i.e. "Momo didn't kill the animal; the

animal was bad), which they conceded was nonsensical, as it is in English. They then said that *ni* being propositionally anaphoric would make sense, though it "wouldn't be [their] first interpretation." This is consistent with the underlying structure of verb-phrase anaphora in Korean, in which verb-phrase anaphora constructions share the same structure as pronominal ones, using postponed pro-forms *kuleha* and *kulay* ("do so"); though postposition as a mechanism of syntactic signaling is not present in Toki Pona, Eko similarly interpreted the subject-position *ni* as a verb-phrase anaphor first and foremost (Kim et al., 2020).

Scenario 4 was similarly uncertain; both respondents agreed that Mia was "probably not" lying - another notable difference from English. Kon gave her the benefit of the doubt: "It might be [Mia's] best guess from lack of information," they said, "or a slight difference in ways a word is being used, [as] it is very plausible for a *jan* to be *akesi* to one person but *akesi ala*[2] to another." Echo agreed; when asked if Mia lied, they responded, in quick succession: "Nah… well… depends… well… this ambiguity is also present in English so [sic]." Due to Toki Pona's minimal vocabulary, it is clear that *sona* ("know") also encompasses the semantic territory of "to believe," and thereby permits uncertainty in a way that English does not.

Scenario 5 was mostly unanimous. Both respondents agreed that Sana's response to Sipi's question was inappropriate; in Eko's words, "Sana is disregarding context, which is kinda important in Toki Pona. The interpretation *is* valid but it's not appropriate." When it came to determining whether Sipi's utterance was a command or a request, things became more divisive. Eko said that they would "probably interpret it as a request," but noted that they "honestly… [weren't] sure if there is much difference between them in Toki Pona." This is inconsistent with the way indirect requests are formatted in Korean, wherein relations of power (e.g. those

[2] In Toki Pona, *jan* is both an honorific prefix for any person and an independent word generally also meaning "person." *akesi* means "lizard" or "reptile;" some use it as a somewhat tongue-in-cheek honorific prefix as well. *ala* is a negation particle (Lang, 2014; Lang, 2021).

between a manager and their employee) are crucial in determining the interpretation of an utterance. Indirect requests are far more common in Korean, and generally considered more polite than direct requests; the social context of the utterance in 5C would lead it to be unequivocally interpreted as a command (Cho, 1982).

Kon, on the other hand, did not interpret Sipi's remarks in 5C as a command nor a request, but rather as a genuine question, in marked contrast to English. Their initial interpretation of *jan Sana o, sina ken ala ken moku e kili?* was as a "literal dietary question," i.e. "is this a fruit you are capable of eating?" Kon added that they "may or may not have figured [the intention] out through context," but that either way, "it does not sound like a command." Interestingly, they offered the sentence *jan Sana o, sina wile ala wile moku e kili ni?* as an alternative ("jan Sana, do you want to eat this fruit?"), which, though similar in meaning, seemed to stray even further away from the bounds of an indirect request.

Both correspondents agreed that between 5A, 5B, and 5C, 5A was the least polite, 5C was the most polite, and 5B was somewhere in the middle. Kon added that 5B was "the most clear," and that "rephrasing a command/request into a question about preference is in general very polite, but in this particular case, where it led to miscommunication, it's not ideal." It is worth noting that, in imperative contexts, Toki Pona's rough equivalent of English "please" is to prefix a command with the receiver's name, as in the case of 5B; this "soften[s] the tone to that of a request" (Gabel, 2007). These findings are consistent with a general emphasis towards a lack of hierarchy in the philosophy and general Toki Pona community at large; it is exceedingly rare that real-world commands need to be uttered in Toki Pona at all, so their use cases are different than those of English, despite this being the native language of the vast majority of its speakers (Lang, 2014).

Conclusion

My initial hypothesis was that the pragmatics of Toki Pona would largely adhere to the conventions of English, no matter a speaker's native background, due to the predominance of English in the Toki Pona community and its centrality. This assumption was resoundingly incorrect in a number of unexpected ways. In fact, a Tokiponist's native language background notwithstanding, Toki Pona has evolved its own distinct set of pragmatic rules in the span of its two-decade-long lifespan, just like any natural language. These rules are governed by Toki Pona's minimal vocabulary and syntax and are instrumental in interpreting any given utterance. Though underlying assumptions made by speakers in deciphering a Toki Pona utterance may be influenced by their native language backgrounds to some extent, these assumptions are driven far more prominently by the unique rules and philosophy of Toki Pona itself.

Many situations that are more or less unambiguous in English are not so in Toki Pona, and require far more conscious effort on part of the speaker to disambiguate. There is no scalar implicature between "some," "most," and "all" in Toki Pona, as those terms do not exist distinctly from one another; there is only "many," "all" and "not all," and speakers must be abundantly clear in using them. Similarly, the use of anaphoric constructions is often ambiguous, and much more difficult to decipher without context than in English or Korean. The same can be said for the semantics of the word "to know" and differentiating between indirect and direct requests.

Culturally, both of my interviewee's responses about Toki Pona suggest a lack of taboo towards sexuality and a lack of emphasis on authority and social hierarchy, which is both consistent with the artistic and philosophical goals of Lang's linguistic experiment and completely different from the personal cultural backgrounds (i.e. the United States and South

Korea) of both speakers in question. This international, egalitarian Toki Pona culture is fundamental to the way that its speakers decode utterances within the language, and takes priority over their native sociolinguistic environments to a degree that I did not previously expect. This is a testament to the success of Lang's experiment; it is clear that, at least within the environment of actively using Toki Pona, the language and its community influences its speakers' pragmatic assumptions and even, to a degree, their philosophical values.

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