

Canadian has people talking about lingo she created

BY SIOBHAN ROBERTS

Over a midmorning breakfast of waffles with whipped cream and bananas, Sonja Elen Kisa provides a crash course on her invented language, Toki Pona – “the simple language of good.”

Take the phrase “Canada has two official languages,” she says: It translates to “ma Kanata li jo e toki suli tu,” but the literal translation in Toki Pona is “Canada land has two big talks.”

In keeping with its minimalist mantra, Toki Pona is a language with 14 basic sounds – five vowels and nine consonants (j, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, w) – that combine to form a vocabulary of only 120 words.

Its minimalism is attracting a growing following of Toki Ponians. Since publishing the tenets of her language on the Internet in 2001, Ms. Kisa, 28 and based in Toronto, estimates several hundred people have dabbled in it – and at least 100 speak it fluently, mostly in online chat rooms and blogs.

A Colorado programmer is developing an apocalyptic computer game with Toki Pona as the spoken language. An Israeli-German singer and member of the Stuttgart Chamber Choir is including it in a concert of musical pieces composed in constructed languages, alongside Esperanto and Star Trek’s Klingon.

Its limited vocabulary may appeal most to mathematicians and computer scientists. “It has the feeling of a logic

puzzle – out of these 120 or so words you have to create all the concepts that exist in any language,” says Leonid Chindelevitch, a doctoral candidate in applied mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has co-taught courses on Toki Pona and other constructed languages during the school’s annual independent activities period.

“It’s something you could see a planet of Ewok creatures speaking,” says Jacob Schwartz, a Boston computer engineer who led the MIT courses and has written an accompanying set of notes, *A Brief History of Constructed Languages*.

The phenomenon of constructing new languages – also called “planned,” “artificial” or “universal” languages – began in the 17th century, as dissatisfaction with natural languages led philosophers to ponder alternatives.

By the late 1800s, universal languages were acquiring subculture status, with some pushing their inventions with political zeal. Perhaps the most famous constructed language is Esperanto, invented in the 1880s by L.L. Zamenhof, a Polish ophthalmologist. Its name means “one who hopes,” and it was created to be a universal second language to promote international peace. Most Toki Poni speakers discover the language through Esperanto.

Ms. Kisa, a linguist who is fluent in five languages, devised Toki Pona as a coping mechanism during a bout of depression. Her motive



Sonja Elen Kisa holds a sign written in Toki Pona that says ‘Person Tibor makes picture of person Sonja.’ She devised the language as a coping mechanism during a bout of depression. TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

unintentionally had good theoretical grounding in what’s called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which holds that language affects the way you think, how you see the world and how you behave.

She finds that her pared-down language is useful when trying to work through a problem. Thinking in Toki Pona strips away confusion and superfluous fluff. “It helps you see patterns, and how things are connected in different ways,” she says.

Pekka Roponen, a psychiatrist at the central hospital of

Hameenlinna, in southern Finland, is taking this therapeutic methodology one step further. He is studying the language’s usefulness in treating patients, having them keep track of their daily thoughts in Toki Pona.

“Classical languages can be used in your inner world to avoid something,” says Dr. Roponen, noting that the Finnish language is notoriously complex, and that the country’s suicide and depression rates are among the world’s highest.

Toki Pona, he adds, “is meant to focus on the positive, so neg-

ative thought patterns and cognitions can be transferred and eliminated by simply using the language.”

At the moment, Ms. Kisa is writing a manual of sorts to meet Toki Ponians’ demands for clarification on grammar and word usage, and to fill in some of the grey areas that have appeared as the language has evolved through use.

Ordering waffles with bananas and whipped cream, for example, takes some thinking. Ms. Kisa gives it a try: “Mi wile jo e pan pi sike mama waso e kilii suwi jelo e telo mama soweli kon.” The literal translation of bananas, “kili suwi jelo,” is “yellow fruit.” Waffles translates to “pan pi sike mama waso” (cereal-grain-product of bird maternal round-things, i.e. egg cake)

In fact, “pan” – for cereal-grain product (wheat, rice, corn) – is one of a few new words Ms. Kisa will be adding in her book. She has decided against many other words suggested by users.

“It’s not meant to write treatises on philosophy,” she says.

Nonetheless, she’s flattered that there are Toki Ponians out there. “Thousands and thousands of people invent languages,” she says. “But with 99.9 per cent of them, the only speakers are themselves.”

» Siobhan Roberts is author of *King of Infinite Space*, a biography of the classical geometer Donald Coxeter (who as a boy wrote a novella in his invented language, Amellai-bian).

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You say tomato...

Some Toki Pona proverbs, or *toki sona* – wisdom speak:

- » *Nasin pona li mute*: There are many good ways of doing things (i.e. all roads lead to Rome).
- » *Ale li pona*: Life is beautiful.
- » *Ale li jo e tenpo*: There is a time for everything.
- » *Nasin ante li pona tawa jan ante*: Different ways are good for different people (i.e. different strokes for different folks.).
- » Source: www.tokipona.org