

## Transcript: Toki Pona, From Personal Art Project to Small World Language

Undergraduate Distinguished Lecture  
 Department of Linguistics at CU Boulder  
 April 8, 2024, 16:00-18:00  
 CBIS Room, Norlin 5th Floor

<a href="#">Introduction by Dr. Kira Hall [0:00]</a>	2
<a href="#">Remarks from Turner Land [4:04]</a>	2
<a href="#">Speaker Introduction from El Hays [7:21]</a>	3
<a href="#">Foreword by jan Lakuse [11:06]</a>	4
<a href="#">Roundtable [22:00]</a>	8
<a href="#">Q1: On Sonja's background and on the origins of Toki Pona</a>	8
<a href="#">Q2: On the language's shift to collaboration from its origins as a personal project</a>	9
<a href="#">Q3: On the languages that inspired Toki Pona</a>	9
<a href="#">Q4: On the languages that Sonja studies and how she studies them</a>	10
<a href="#">Q5: On whether Sonja expected Toki Pona to blow up, and what it meant to witness that</a>	11
<a href="#">Q6: On Sonja's stance towards Tokiponidos, languages inspired by Toki Pona</a>	12
<a href="#">Q7: On differences in early Toki Pona how the language has evolved over time</a>	13
<a href="#">Q8: On developments in the Toki Pona community that surprised Sonja most</a>	14
<a href="#">Q9: On the philosophy and development of the sign language. Luka Pona (LPSL)</a>	15
<a href="#">Q10: On gendered pronouns in constructed languages.</a>	16
<a href="#">Q11: On how Sonja memorized her own language</a>	17
<a href="#">Q12: On 'new words' (nimi sin) and whether they go against Toki Pona's spirit</a>	17
<a href="#">Q13: On Sonja's unique position and activities within the Toki Pona community</a>	19
<a href="#">Q14: On how we can convince new people to approach the language</a>	20
<a href="#">Q15: On the accessibility of Toki Pona's phonemic inventory.</a>	21
<a href="#">Q16: On how Toki Pona translation works in practice</a>	22
<a href="#">Q17: On how one can join the Toki Pona community</a>	23
<a href="#">Q18: On Sonja's 'Oh shit!' moment for realizing Toki Pona's success</a>	24
<a href="#">Q19: On how the Toki Pona language relates to 'Toki Pona culture'</a>	25
<a href="#">Closing Comments by Dr. Laura Michaelis [1:15:20]</a>	26
<a href="#">Event Conclusion</a>	28
<a href="#">The Event Program</a>	29
<a href="#">Plaintext English version of Event Program</a>	30
<a href="#">lipu pi tenpo kulupu</a>	31
<a href="#">lipu pi tenpo kulupu li kepeken toki pona li lon nasin ni: ilo li ken lukin e toki</a>	32

### **Introduction by Dr. Kira Hall [0:00]**

I think it's time to get started. 'o kama pona!' which means 'Welcome!' in Toki Pona. I'm Kira Hall, a professor of linguistics and chair of undergraduate studies in the linguistics department. I'm thrilled to be welcoming you to this event today. I don't want to spend too much time here, as I want to hand things over to our amazing undergraduate students who organized this event. [...] This event was organized by the officers of the Undergraduate Linguistics Association, if you could raise your hands. And the officers of the Ling Club, if you could raise your hands. I just want to say, what a privilege it has been to work with these undergraduate students. We have an amazing group of undergraduate students in linguistics generally, but these officers are exceptional.

This is the fourth undergraduate distinguished speaker event here at CU Boulder. These events are completely imagined, organized, and designed by our undergraduate students. This group has been a particularly great team, and a rewarding team for me to work with.

I had the opportunity last night to have dinner with our invited speakers: Sonja Lang, otherwise known as jan Sonja, and Chelsea, otherwise known as [...] jan Lakuse. I just want to say that, in addition to giving us all the gift of this language, they're also extremely, extremely nice people. I'm really happy to have them here and to have them share in the community that we have here as well. You'll hear more about them in a minute, from our undergraduates who are going to introduce them. I also want to extend a warm welcome to twelve high school students from Cherry Creek who are here. I think we have a couple of other high schools in the audience. All members of the public, welcome to you, if you come from afar.

With that, I want to turn this over to Turner Land. Turner is one of our four co-presidents of the Undergraduate Linguistics Association. After hearing from Turner, you'll hear from El Hayes, who is the Ling Club CU Conlang Officer, if I got that right? [*laughter from audience*] Turner is an undergraduate student in Linguistics and International Affairs. El is a Linguistics major, and also the translator of the bilingual program that I hope all of you have in front of you. With that, let me turn it over to Turner!

### **Remarks from Turner Land [4:04]**

Hello everyone, thank you all for being here. toki! I'm Turner Land, a co-president of our very own Undergraduate Linguistics Association. It's an honor to be here and have such a wonderful guest speaker. This event was part of a collaborative effort with the Undergraduate Linguistics Association and the Linguistics Club.

Linguistics Club is student-ran and meets every week, discussing linguistics topics and running activities. This year, they've been in the process of making their own CU-themed conlang. A conlang is a language intentionally designed by someone, such as Esperanto or Na'vi from the movie *Avatar*, as opposed to a natural language, like English or Mandarin. Undergraduate Linguistics Association, also called ULA or 'oo-lah,' acts as a liaison between the

undergraduates and the linguistics faculty at CU, and helps organize special events such as Q&A talks with our graduate students.

This is the fourth Undergraduate Distinguished Speaker event, and the first one since Covid, which itself is distinguished by allowing undergraduate students to select a speaker that they want, help organize the event, and giving a unique opportunity for undergraduates to actually engage with the speaker and their work. We put out a vote for who the undergraduates wanted to speak this year, and they chose Sonja Lang, known as jan Sonja in Toki Pona. As far as I know, no other department at CU has a similar Undergraduate Distinguished Speaker event.

I discovered linguistics in high school, and around the same time also became interested in conlangs, Toki Pona being central to that, as its simplicity made it easy to pick up and start chatting with people online. Toki Pona was the first language I seriously dived into, and the first language I ever bought a book for, so it feels surreal to have a hand in organizing a Q&A featuring the creator of Toki Pona. Toki Pona really strengthened my interest in linguistics, and I'm sure if I hadn't found it I wouldn't be standing here today. I was thrilled when Sonja emailed me back, very promptly I should add, saying she would love to come speak at CU, since she was partially the reason I am in ULA in the first place. I remember first hearing about ULA, and emailing Dr. Hall about becoming an officer early in my junior year. While the officer slots were full that year, she said I should come to a ULA-organized lunch with the Cherry Creek High School linguistics club, and I would like to thank them for being here today. I would come to discover that the Linguistics department is a really wonderful bunch of really smart people, who are dedicated and passionate about the field. I might be biased saying this being a linguistics major, but my linguistics classes at CU are always the most interesting, rewarding, and engaging, out of all of my other classes in my schedule. I'd like to thank the linguistics department chair, Professor Laura Michaelis and the linguistics associate chair of undergraduate studies, who is also our ULA faculty advisor, Professor Kira Hall, for organizing this event, and our sponsors, the Department of Linguistics and the Center for Humanities and Arts. Thank y'all, and now I'll hand this over to fellow linguistics major El Hays, who will introduce our speakers. mi tawa!

### **Speaker Introduction from El Hays [7:21]**

toki! Hello! My name is El Hays. I'm a current sophomore majoring in Linguistics. I'm also one of the many officers of the Ling Club. Specifically, I facilitate the creation of our club's collaborative "conlang" (constructed language). Today, we're here to talk about a very cool and far more complete conlang that is very dear to me: Toki Pona.

Toki Pona is a conlang with a very small vocabulary. *toki* means language, and *pona* means both good and simple, so it literally translates to good or simple language. The exact number of words depends on the speaker, but generally most people use between 120 and 140. What was once a personal project has grown every year for the past 23 years that it has existed. Its primary discord server has over 14,000 members and its subreddit has over 20,000 members, if I have those numbers right.

Today, we have two distinguished speakers, jan Sonja and jan Lakuse! jan Sonja, or Sonja Lang, created Toki Pona in 2001 and authored three books- Toki Pona: The Language of Good, the Toki Pona Dictionary, and her latest book, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (Toki Pona Edition), which are all available for sale after the event. She is also a self-taught polyglot! jan Lakuse, or Chelsea Raacz, is a member of the Toki Pona community who speaks Toki Pona and uses Luka Pona Sign Language, or LPSL-- a complete sign language based on Toki Pona. They also teach the language to new speakers, organize an annual writing competition, and moderate the Toki Pona discord!

I first started learning Toki Pona when I was in high school, during the COVID pandemic. I learned the vocabulary, refined my grammar skills, but never really put the effort in to become fluent. Every so often, I would pop into the Discord and chat a little bit or translate a song into Toki Pona for fun. Last summer, I went to a Toki Pona meetup in DC, near my hometown. I woke up early and took the metro down and met up with the group. Together, we toured some museums, including Planet Word, a linguistics-themed museum! It was a little overwhelming to be surrounded by these big names from the community who had flown in from all over. I also had very little experience speaking or listening to Toki Pona. But the sheer energy and positivity of the group was very powerful, and I had a blast. At one point, we found a Wawa, which is a convenience store chain on the east coast. Wawa means “power” or “energy” in Toki Pona, and everyone was completely ecstatic. We all took a group photo in front of the Wawa, confusing many passerby and shoppers [*laughter from audience*].

I think a lot of that positivity and excitement comes naturally when speaking Toki Pona. In order to express yourself, you need to get very good at condensing things down to their essence. As a natural result of speaking the language, you reimagine the things around you in a new light, one that does away with unnecessary details. You end up describing things as exactly how they are to you.

Simplicity may not always be synonymous with positivity. But speaking in Toki Pona can have a grounding effect. Throughout high school, I struggled with my mental health. COVID was definitely no help. I remember sometimes, when I would feel bad at school, I would start writing in my notebook in Toki Pona. In doing so, I was forced to see things for what they were, in their most basic state. That doesn't mean I was sugarcoating everything in positivity. It just helped me understand myself and my emotions. Toki Pona, in its simplicity, can be more authentic to ourselves and to reality. In this very complicated and tiring world, it's a haven of straightforwardness.

And with that, I am pleased to introduce jan Lakuse!

### **Foreword by jan Lakuse [11:06]**

ale o toki. mi jan Lakuse li pilin pona tan ni: kulupu li ken e kama mi a. mi wile open kepeken nasin pona li wile toki e ni: seme la mi ken kama lon. kulupu en ale ni li ken kama lon. sina ale li



sona e ni: kulupu Mewika en kulupu Kanata li ike suli li kama lon tan ni: ona li pali ike li kama lon ma pi ona ala. mi lon kulupu Kanata. ma mi li ma pi kulupu Anisinape pi kulupu Ininu pi kulupu Takota pi kulupu Tene li mama e kulupu sin Mesi pi nasin telo loje. mi toki e ni tan ni: kulupu Ansinape en kulupu Takota li wan tawa kulupu Sisisa tawa kulupu Inana E. mi ale li lon tomo, anu seme? tomo li lon ma. ma ni li ma pi kulupu Sisisa pi kulupu Inana E li ma pi kulupu U kin. tawa pona ma la kulupu tu wan ni li wile. ni la kulupu wawa Mewika o pali pi ale ken tawa ni: kulupu tu wan ni li suli li nasin e ma li wawa sama kulupu Mewika li nasin e kulupu ma lon nasin ale wile.

So my name in English is Chelsea [*laughter from audience*], and my name in Toki Pona is jan Lakuse. I am incredibly grateful to have received such warm welcomes, the community here is amazing. Such warm welcomes from a bright selection of students, esteemed faculty and community members here at CU.

Toki Pona. The Language of 120 words, The Language of 137 words. The Language of Minimalism. The Language of Transparency. The Language Composed Only of Things that Spark Joy. The language of my community, the language of my art, the language of my laughter, the language of my heart.

You can obviously tell I'm a bit of a fan.

For a certain kind of nerdy person, the premise is magnetic. Memorize the entire vocabulary in a weekend. Satisfy that childhood urge to speak in a secret language that nobody else will ever understand. For other people, it's simply not interesting. But for one reason or another, despite being a language with no native speakers, Toki Pona possesses a sizeable speakership that is both broad and international. Over the years, different waves of people have entered into the space and experimented with new speaking styles, new grammars and new words. Now in its 23rd year, following an unprecedented uptick in activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, speaking styles within the community are as diverse as ever, the culture of Toki Pona is lively and spirited. We have physical gatherings, like the annual Toki Pona meetup in Europe, and its sister event in the US, this year it's taking place in Chicago. Every year, near August 8, we hold a 24-hour livestream celebration for Toki Pona's birthday. Truly, Toki Pona culture is nerd culture.

Throughout this interactive roundtable, you're going to hear about all of these things from an individual with a very unique perspective and experience within the Toki Pona community. But I first wanted to offer a few comments about what Toki Pona is on a fundamental level to sorta set the stage.

Toki Pona has about 120 words ish. We can debate about that. We can use these words in various combinations to describe everything that we need to talk about. There are no true distinctions between a word as a verb, noun, or adjective in toki pona. For example, the word 'loje' is often translated as 'red,' but it also means 'reddish,' 'the color red,' 'to be red,' as in the state of being red, or 'to redden' depending on where it is located within the utterance. Toki

Pona, when used as a language for communication, accomplishes what it needs to by slowly narrowing the point of reference by using increasingly specific context. This means that translation looks very different in Toki Pona than in other languages. For example, let's say I want to say, my uncle owns a vineyard in France. If I were to translate this in a typical language, I would mostly find words that correspond to each of those other words and then go through it.

Like in Esperanto, My is *mia*. Uncle is *onklo*. *Posedas* is like owns. A vineyard is *vinbergardeno*. In is *en*, France is *Francio*. *Mia onklo posedas vinbergardenon en Francio*. It's very straightforward.

When grammar and syntax differ, the words might shift around, but the general elements of the utterance are preserved. For example, in Japanese, *watashi no ojisan wa Furansu ni budō-en o shoyū shite imasu*. Literally, me, my-uncle-he, france-in, vineyard-that, to-own-does. Similar elements, different order.

If I was speaking Toki Pona to a group of Toki Pona speakers, I would say, “Hey. You know liquid that makes you silly? [Audience laughter] You know how there's different types of that liquid? Okay, imagine you're a rich person and you're drinking it while you're bird-ing to a different country. Now, that's the kind of liquid I'm talking about. How do they make that? They need fruit. They need the fruit to wait for a long time so it gets silly. That fruit, though, it grows on trees. Now, some tradespeople own a lot of those silly-fruit trees in one land. My parent's similar person rules over a group of those trees in France. He gives money to people and they get the fruit.”

My uncle owns a vineyard in France. I mean I could just say “my parent's same person rules over silly fruit trees in France,” but it's not as guaranteed to be understood. If I wrote that in my private journal though, I would understand it, because the information isn't new to me. What's common about the two approaches though is that we're using the base 120 words to describe the world around us in ways that we perceive. What's different about the two approaches is audience and purpose. Is your purpose internal reflection and self-expression? Or is it to communicate new information to an external audience?

In the broadest terms, these are the two styles of Toki Pona, and many speakers find themselves engaging in both styles to different degrees of frequency. But not everyone. There are lots of people who engage with Toki Pona primarily as an artistic medium and rarely in social situations. There are people who only use Toki Pona in social settings and rarely as a medium for their art. And both of these approaches are valid ways to engage with Toki Pona. This isn't really true for natural languages.

As a social medium, Toki Pona's design features give a certain unique flavor to conversations. Take the example that I gave just a minute ago. Not only did you learn that my hypothetical uncle owns a vineyard in France, you also learned that I consider wine to primarily be a drink for fancy rich people and that this uncle presumably has a pretty active role in the day-to-day operations of the vineyard, which isn't information you get from the English variation. The

destination is the same, but the journey is so much more varied and peripatetic. In Toki Pona conversations, manners are thrown out of the window. Politeness is simply garnered by context. You generally don't have to worry about coming across as 'rude' to someone, because we generally assume politeness by default. There really aren't words that are more polite than other words. There are also no jargon in Toki Pona. A person can't throw a million-dollar buzzword at you like *antidisestablishmentarianism* and expect you to know what they're talking about. They have to be curious about where you are and meet you where you're at. Instead of conversation starting with a buzzword, '*antidisestablishmentarianism*,' it might start instead with, 'so how familiar are you with the Church of England?' [*Audience laughter*]

As an art medium, Toki Pona speakers both translate and create new original songs, stories, comics, poetry. Some creators put in a lot of legwork to ensure their messages come across transparently, and others fully embrace subjectivity and ambiguity that Toki Pona provides. Some Toki Pona work truly reads as this embrace, a most deep embrace of some post-modern state of unknowing. Others are harder to decipher simply because the person has prioritized making it comprehensible to other people. For example, I was recently teaching Toki Pona and I asked my student to describe an escalator. We often do these little exercises. I gave them a couple days to about it. They said, "Well, an elevator is an *akesi*. It's a cold-blooded creature." [*Audience chuckles*]. I asked them to explain themselves [*Audience laughter*]. They said, "Well, it's like a moving path composed of a dozen hard-shelled turtles moving inexorably up and then down again." And they said, "I'm afraid of escalators." I'm like, okay, well.

There are more comprehensible ways to talk about escalators. I can talk about a path of moving horizontal surfaces that carries one upwards. But as my student showed me, it's not the only way that someone might view an escalator. Within creative contexts, you're more likely to encounter translations that fully embrace the subjectivity of the speaker. I really hope that when my student becomes more fluent in Toki Pona, they'll write a horror story in Toki Pona about escalators, because it would be absolutely bone-chilling. [*Audience laughter*]

The title of this roundtable is "Toki Pona: From Personal Art Project to Small World Language." I think many would assume that in saying 'personal art project,' we're only referring to Sonja's experience here. After all, Sonja's the one who released the first draft of the language in 2001, the one who published the first Toki Pona book in 2014, a book that some now treat as a Bible? Sonja's the one who collected data for the 2021 Toki Pona Dictionary, she's the one who published *The Wizard of Oz* in Toki Pona logographs. There are now three words in the Toki Pona language that are used to explicitly refer to acts of Sonja's art. Surely, when we say that Toki Pona is a personal Art Project, we can only be saying that it's a personal Art Project that belongs to Sonja. But I hope this introduction has offered an alternative hypothesis. For every Toki Pona speaker who speaks this small world language, they also have, in learning the language and reflecting on how their own worldview can be incorporated, their own little personal art project going on.

We have an amazing group of panelists today. The format's going to mostly be a discussion amongst all of us. At the end, there will be a period of audience questions. Thank you.

**Roundtable [22:00]**

KIRA HALL: Thank you for that really, really wonderful introduction. [...]

KIRA HALL: Okay. Now, River. Okay so I just want to introduce the panel. You've already met our two celebrated speakers here. We also have Olivia Bahr, who is from Linguistics. We have Caedin Cook. You can raise your hands. Caden, who is in Computer Science. We have Jack Foster from Linguistics and Anthropology. We have El Hays, who you've already met, from Linguistics. We have Tessa Moskoff from Linguistics and Neuroscience. Finally, we're really pleased to have River Smith from the Cherry Creek High School Ling Club. So Olivia? Do you want to take it away and start off with a question?

OLIVIA BAHR: To start off, we would like to know a little bit about your background, how you grew up, and how you got interested in building your own language.

SONJA LANG: Okay I grew up in a part of Canada called New Brunswick, which is near Maine. I grew up in a French-speaking family, so I grew up as a minority speaker of French. Then, I guess at a young age I learned English as well, because that's the dominant language. When you're a minority speaker, you learn the dominant language as well. I guess I was always interested in languages. As soon as I noticed that people are speaking differently and there's different people... Yeah, I learned many languages when I was young. Sort-of on my own, self-taught. Studied German and Esperanto. Recently I've really been into Malay Indonesian. So that's a little bit.

OLIVIA BAHR: And then how did you, when did you start building it? How long did it take you to make Toki Pona?

SONJA LANG: It started in around 2000-2001. At the time, I spoke several languages and I was seeing how there were similarities and some universal themes that languages have in common. Then, there are specifics that are different in every language. I guess you could say I was trying to look at the core of things and find archetypes that keep occurring in language. It was like mapping my brain onto paper. The premise is having very few words and each of these words are very broad and include a whole bunch of things that are related to each other. And with the help of context, that's enough to communicate. But if you need to have more details, you can always add more details.

TESSA MOSKOFF: I was wondering. Seeing the Toki Pona community and being on the Toki Pona Discord, did Toki Pona always feel like a collaborative language or was it originally a more personal project? How has that changed over time?

SONJA LANG: I guess it started as a personal project and then I published it on a website in 2001. The internet being the way it is, people gravitate towards things and then make it their own, you know? We had Toki Pona forums in the early days. But I think the collaborative nature of Toki Pona has always been there from the start. I'm not a person who's controlling. I'd rather

people make it their own, then it takes on an energy with each person who uses Toki Pona in their own unique way.

LAKUSE: And you've had absences from the community, or periods when you've kind-of stepped back.

SONJA LANG: That's true.

LAKUSE: And I think in those times-- I'm thinking mostly after you published *pu*, which is the 2014 publication. There was a period where people sorta venerated it or viewed it as an authoritative text. Well, you put clearly in the book, 'This is my way of speaking Toki Pona,' and people were doing innovations before that as well. So it's always sorta been collaborative, but there's this weird, oddly neo-conservative force, that tries to stick to *pu*. I don't know. I don't understand it quite myself.

SONJA LANG: It's like a starting point. Even in the first book, *Toki Pona: The Language of Good*, it's like a foundation, but at the end of the lessons-- I forget the exact wording-- but I say something like 'Be creative! o toki pona! The rest belongs to you!' So, the collaborative nature of Toki Pona, I think, has always been a part of its spirit for me.

EL HAYES: Hello, I know you've talked about other languages that you know. How specifically have the other languages that you know influenced Toki Pona?

SONJA LANG: I think Toki Pona is kinda its own thing. There's words like *la* or words like *pi*, that have a role that is completely new, I think. I wasn't necessarily influenced by other languages. Being a polyglot helped me to see what's possible. Like seeing the canvas of what colors are possible. You know how languages differ so greatly from one another. And I've always been fascinated by learning. It's hard because when you live... Let's say, I'm from Canada. English and French happen to be the first ones that I was exposed to. But I intentionally sought out, 'Oh, I want to learn Finnish,' as it's from a different family. To learn languages from different families has always been broadening for the mind.

LAKUSE: At the very least, it impacted what words got in.

SONJA LANG: That's true.

LAKUSE: You were drawing inspiration from different languages. Not languages that you had necessarily learned, but languages that were interesting to you. I think one of the biggest examples of how this impacted grammatically is the Toki Pisin *li*.

SONJA LANG: The predicate marker *li*, yeah. It's similar to a particle in Tok Pisin.

LAKUSE: There's one weird exceptional rule in Toki Pona which is that after the first person and second person, singular, you don't use the verb marker. And that's actually imported over from how the third person marker was initially supposed to be used.

SONJA LANG: And *mi* and *sina* are so common that it makes sense for things most common in the language to be shortened. They don't get modified as much as third person subjects.

LAKUSE: I think mostly it's just exposing you to the possibilities. I think, actually, a lot of the syntax has been done quite unnaturally.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, the syntax is novel. The words were taken from different languages. You know, *sama* comes from the word 'sama' in whatever language.

LAKUSE: Esperanto.

SONJA LANG: Yes, Esperanto.

EL HAYS: One thing I noticed when learning Toki Pona... I've learned some other languages, or learned about other languages that take words from other languages to create their vocabulary. Toki Pona is notably less Euro-centric in that regard, which I thought was really refreshing. To follow up on that, what languages have you been studying recently and how do you study them?

SONJA LANG: That's a good question. I'll talk a little about my time in Singapore. Three to four years ago, I was in Singapore for about three years for work, my husband was working there. I focused on learning Malay/Indonesian. My approach for learning that language as an adult from scratch was I got a whole bunch of books written by local authors. I then scanned them and created my own little corpus of the language by local authors. Then, I created a frequency list of what are the most common words. That's my strategy. Then I created my own little Memrise or Anki decks with the most common words in the language that I'm studying.

EL HAYS: Is that the same corpus that's on your website? Yeah?

SONJA LANG: Yes, yes.

EL HAYS: Yeah, yeah!

SONJA LANG: So you've seen it. [*laughter from audience*]

EL HAYS: Alright, that's all from me.

JACK FOSTER: Alright, so the first one I'm going to ask is how did you... Well first off, did you expect the language to take off the way it did? Were you planning for that? And were you surprised and if so, how did you deal with that?

SONJA LANG: Yeah, so I was not expecting it to. I thought it was just a little weird thing, that no-one would understand the purpose of, that would just exist on the internet along with other weird things that exist on the internet. But very quickly, it gained momentum. Fairly early I noticed, 'Okay, this is actually resonating with people,' and then I have a role to play in the growth and in the sharing of this language.

JACK FOSTER: What was that process like at first being part of it? It's such a... nonexistent experience. I guess it's a very rare experience to watch your own language grow.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, and a bit like Lakuse said, there's been periods where, for several years, I've been absent from Toki Pona community, and people are just doing their own thing. And then there's times when I'm more involved, helping beginners learn. But I think a big turning point for the growth of the language was maybe with Discord as a technology. Before that, maybe people were using more forums, or Facebook, or media like that, where the conversation doesn't evolve beyond, 'Hello, where are you from?' 'Oh, yes, how are you? How do you do?' But on Discord, there are live chats happening every day. People are using, reinforcing each other and learning together. That's where I think a lot of the growth came from, from that medium.

LAKUSE: I also think it was right time, right place. Sonja, you and I have talked about how the idea of a minimalist language in itself, it's not.... really, anyone can kind-of come up with that. I think anyone can do the ritual of finding which words you want to include. I think your draft specifically, taken up by Esperantists because you initially published it in Esperanto, when it was taken up by the right group of people...

SONJA LANG: At the right place and right time.

LAKUSE: Right place, right time, we could be sitting with a different person right here in an alternative timeline.

SONJA LANG: And the time, 20 years, it's two decades... I think the YouTube effect, of people like Jan Misali and other YouTubers who've used Toki Pona in their broadcasts, has increased the number of people interested in Toki Pona and using Toki Pona.

LAKUSE: Toki Pona has definitely grown alongside the internet. With each development, it's gotten bigger and bigger.

JACK FOSTER: Thank you.

RIVER SMITH: As Toki Pona has grown, there's been some people that have created conlangs based off of it, such as Toki Ma, for example. Have you ever attempted to try to learn them or communicate with the users?

SONJA LANG: I haven't learned that many of these new languages that are based on Toki Pona, but I think it's awesome that Toki Pona is like a springboard to creativity and people can

use it as a base to create new things, go in new directions. Toki Ma is an example and I think it's evolved even now to have a new name.

LAKUSE: So Toki Ma is a project that proposed to 'fix' Toki Pona because it wasn't international-auxilliary' enough. It couldn't be used as a functional language, the creators believed.

SONA LANG: I disagree with that.

LAKUSE: So they essentially, they added, they added a whole bunch of words and were like, 'We fixed it! We made an international language!' Of course, that didn't bode over so well for recruiting people from Toki Pona because you're approaching Toki Pona with that deficit mindset. So over the past couple of years, they've corrected. They've shifted their gear to be more, 'inspired by' [Toki Pona], and now it's a completely different project. Now that community is doing its own thing. Speaking as a Luka Pona user, Luka Pona is a constructed sign language based off of Toki Pona intended to be used in tandem within the Toki Pona community. It's based off of the same vocabulary in terms of content, but the grammar is very different to reflect how actual sign languages are used in the real world. That Luka Pona has been completely embraced by a lot, I think. We feel very welcome within the community. Another...

SONJA LANG: There's also Tuki Tiki, I think it's called. It's like a version of Toki Pona that has only like 40 or so words. It's really creatively well-done and is has its fans too.

LAKUSE: There's a lot of people who go on... They master Toki Pona and they're like, 'I'm bored!' so they decide to learn Tuki Tiki. '*tuki tiki*' in Tuki Tiki means like cyclical communication. They really do sacrifice a lot of that usability in order to get down to that 40 words. The grammar is also hard, various aspects of it are quite obtuse, but I do think it's really entertaining!

SONJA LANG: So my main focus has been Toki Pona, but I'm happy that there's branches and creativity and people who can use it to remix it. That's the nature of art.

LAKUSE: As long as you don't go dissing the Toki Pona community with your project, typically we're like 'Yeah!' I mean, a lot of Toki Pona speakers are also conlangers themselves. I'm sure there's countless, countless, Tokiponidos, is what we call them. Offsprings of Toki Pona, that people have made, that haven't even seen the light of day.

CAEDIN COOK: Hello, so since Toki Pona has become such a big project, how have you seen it evolve naturally over time from the original rules that you put?

SONJA LANG: That's a good question. I think the *ku* book, the Toki Pona Dictionary, was kind of the period where I was coming back to the Toki Pona community after an absence, looking at what has changed a little bit since my original descriptions and my first book. I noticed little things like how the particle *li* can be used for the first person when it's in the second place with a new predicate. What are some other examples of small changes... People use *lon* for yes,



whereas I have always used repeating the verb for yes. Little things like that. It's like observing how Toki Pona has broadened and how people have, through consensus... If the principle is that there's a whole group of people and they agree with each other, they understand each other, then it's not a "mistake." It's just a natural, slight evolution in the language.

LAKUSE: With *ku*, 17 new words were sort-of embraced as official. That's— I don't know numbers— I can't say a percentage but that was pretty significant. Not everyone who speaks Toki Pona uses those 17 official new added words. There's people who use words outside of that. I use some of the 17, but also some that are not in the 17, in terms of new words. New words are like the most contentious thing I think, because it goes against this... People are like, 'Oh my god! you're destroying the very fundamentals of the language, so sacrilegious!' But even in the beginning, you— the initial draft, I think only had what, like 115?

SONJA LANG: Something like that, yeah.

LAKUSE: Slowly, over time, you added words, like *mani*.

SONJA LANG: *pan* and *esun* came a bit later, they came just before *pu* I think.

LAKUSE: Yeah, so these are pretty fundamental words, for money, for shop, for bread.

SONJA LANG: *alasa* was also added. That's reflected also, I think, another good example of a change that happened in Toki Pona is, because *alasa* didn't exist as a word originally, I used *lukin* as a pre-verb for 'to try.' When I added *alasa*, people clung to that as 'to try,' so it became, alongside *lukin*, a way to say 'to try' as a preverb.

LAKUSE: People have.. I wouldn't say there's necessarily dialects that have developed, but certainly as people have spent more time in spaces with each other, different norms emerge, and those norms change a bit over time. I think Toki Pona has a very sort-of cyclical nature where people will join and people will leave. It's sort-of like a whole ship of Theseus situation. So if you read Toki Pona documents from back in the day, I'll often notice things like, 'Oh, I wouldn't do that. I would do this one thing differently.' It's interesting how people all have their own approach to it. There is no one, authoritative, Toki Pona.

OLIVIA BAHR: In observing this growth and change, what is the most surprising or interesting thing that has come from the community, from more than just you and this language you created?

SONJA LANG: I think when we were rehearsing the questions, I think for me it was probably when we got an ISO code. When it was like, okay we're alongside other world languages and we have the code, [tok], that in computer science, you can use to mark that the document is in Toki Pona.

LAKUSE: The ISO is the International Standards Organization, they issue codes to those which are official languages that computers can support on their devices. In, what year was it, like 2021, or 2020?

SONJA LANG: And the application to get it recognized as a language had so many examples of, 'Toki Pona is used in these publications, it's used in this medium,' and it was like the whole community came together to kind of prove that we exist.

LAKUSE: A big 'hurrah!'

SONJA LANG: It's like we're recognized.

LAKUSE: I think another... we were just discussing this, Sonja, I think you were surprised that *kijetesantakalu* became a meme.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, yeah. How did the raccoon become so popular?

LAKUSE: So there's a joke word in Toki Pona. The Toki Pona community is very silly. We have all of these very engineered words to be maximized. How much depth, how much semantic depth can we get out of this word? We also have one word that just means raccoon, and raccoon specifically. Most words in Toki Pona are, at most, are three syllables. Three-syllable words like *sitelen*, *alasa*. This is *ki-je-te-san-ta-ka-lu*, [*laughter from audience*] which you proposed as a sort of joke word April First, and then you forgot about it and then it came back.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, it was like 10 years ago. I was like, okay, as a joke, here's a new word. This is the word for raccoons, and raccoon-related animals also.

[*A bit of joyful ruckus from the audience*]

LAKUSE: Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

SONJA LANG: For example the kinkajou and red pandas.

LAKUSE: I'm so sorry, I messed that up! [*Laughter from the audience*] I think you mentioned that you—

SONJA LANG: Yeah, I forgot it! I forgot about that. It's just a one-off joke that I made and then people— because it's the internet, it remembers, and people read it. I came back into a voice chat one day and people were using it and I'm like, what is that?

LAKUSE: It's the mascot.

SONJA LANG: I remember once you specifically told me, I think it was *apeja*, and I was like, 'What's this word?' And you're like, 'That's your word, Sonja. You made this word, don't you know it?' [*Laughter from audience*]

TESS MOSKOFF: Okay, this is like jumping back in the conversation a little bit. Earlier you mentioned about signing in Toki Pona, that it's been modified grammatically to follow other sign languages' grammar. I was wondering if you would say that the priority in Toki Pona signing is creating and understanding and mirroring other sign languages or if there's anything that leads it into creating the grammar more minimally to match the ideals of Toki Pona.

LAKUSE: Okay, I'm not the creator of Luka Pona Sign Language but I am one of its three signers.

SONJA LANG: And a teacher, you teach it.

LAKUSE: It's a very small community right now, but it was originally introduced by a hard of hearing Toki Pona speaker, a fluent BSL signer. And I mean, the idea of a Toki Pona sign has been going on for such a long time... Actually, if you buy *pu*, the 2014 publication, you will see a version of Toki Pona sign language, which is essentially a manually coded Toki Pona, where signs and hand gestures are matched one to one. It's basically like a writing system on your hands. That's not how sign languages in the real world work. Olipija, who is the signer that I mentioned, really wanted to exploit, match the very iconic, picture-oriented, visual aspect of sign language and marry that with the minimal aspect of Toki Pona as well.

There are three mainly attested word orders in sign language. I believe it's Subject-Object-Verb, Object-Subject-Verb, and one other. Toki Pona is mainly Subject-Verb-Object, which isn't attested in sign languages. So our main goal was first off, accessibility. We are very anti-prescriptive in saying that you can take this thing that we created and shift it to however you need to use it in your life. There's lots of people I've taught who have actually used it because they occasionally lose the ability to speak and so they find it quite helpful. Primarily, it's an accessibility tool, but it's also this environment where we can introduce concepts from Deaf linguistics and sign language linguistics into a less harmful environment. People who experiment in this way with real sign languages— there's real stakes there. There are real communities who use these languages. As a linguistic toy, LPSL can be used as an entry way to getting into signed languages. Both me and the primary signer concur that if you learn LPSL, it should not be your last sign language that you learn.

SONJA LANG: And it has cool features like directionality and classifiers and things like that. It's a different medium and it's a different space.

LAKUSE: Yeah I'll demonstrate very briefly here. There's a concept in sign linguistics called sign space where you set up different 'objects' in literal physical space around you and then make them interact with each other. I can say this is like a *tomo* (house) here. This is the sign language word for *tomo*. Then I can illustrate a *jan* who is going in, maybe sleeping a bit, coming up and then leaving. So there's that visual aspect that is not present at all— like, we don't have an equivalent for that with spoken language. There's also directionality that features in the grammar as well. The word *lukin* in Toki Pona means 'to see.' There about three versions of

*lukin* in LPSL. There's *lukin* [*Lakuse demonstrates, showing the general, non directional version of the sign.*] I'm *lukin* at you [*Lakuse shifts the general show the two pointer fingers pointing from themselves to an imagined interlocutor.*] You're *lukin* at me [*Lakuse reverses the motion, now the two pointer fingers are directed at themselves.*], and *lukin* at the third person [*Lakuse does the same motion, directed slightly off to the side*], and the third person is *lukin* at me [*Lakuse reverses the previous motion, the 'eyes' now point towards themselves.*] There's also *lukin* as just 'eye' in general here [*Lakuse points to their eye*]. So it's directional, based on that. So we've kinda married those two worlds. I hope that answers your question, that was a lot. I'm so sorry.

TESS MOSKOFF: No, it's super interesting!

EL HAYS: What do you think about gender and gendered pronouns in conlangs? Because Toki Pona does not have grammatical gender and the pronoun for *any* person is *ona*. Whereas, you can compare for example, Esperanto, where there is gender. I just want to know what your thought process was when considering that, especially as an Esperantist yourself.

SONJA LANG: Not 'ist' but Esperanto speaker.

EL HAYS: Oh, alright. [*Laughter from audience*]

SONJA LANG: That's a good question. I may have been influenced by Finnish, I guess. Finnish has— Toki Pona, and Indonesian and Chinese even— it has just one third person singular pronoun for he/she/they. I guess I like that because it's just... less. But it's interesting also on this topic that some languages have gendered first-person pronouns. Like Thai, where it's the person who says 'I,' and then when you say 'I' it's either I (female) or I (male). Or Arabic has second-person gendered pronouns, I believe? There's lots of options out there. I guess, why did I choose this particular configuration of gender or non-gender?

EL HAYS: Well, I think it is a little bit self-explanatory, given the minimalism. I just wanted to know your thoughts on the topic.

SONJA LANG: I guess the design goal was to keep it broad as the default, and then you can add gender later. You can add words like *meli* or *tonsi* or *mije* to specify gender if you want, but it's optional.

EL HAYS: It's just a short question [*chuckles*].

JACK FOSTER: This question has to do with your design process. When you were creating the language, and I suppose this goes for any language, did you have a process for memorizing it or practicing it or did just occur to you while you were doing it. And if so, while you were creating were you making changes? Did you have a process for doing that?

SONJA LANG: I didn't have to memorize much. I think the words kind of came to me somehow. I remembered them. But there's I think one funny anecdote. I kept forgetting the word for *noka* in

the beginning and then I asked people like, “Can we please change *noka* to *jalan*?” And everyone was like, “No, no, we’ve already established that *noka* is foot.” I was like, “Okay, so forget about *jalan*” and I come back to the community 20 years later and people have found *jalan* in some old post and they’ve added it to the dictionary.

LAKUSE: My friend inwin uses *jalan* specifically to mean like ‘to go afoot.’

SONJA LANG: Oh yeah? So in most cases, I just somehow remember the words because I created them. I didn’t have to learn Toki Pona the conventional way that I might have to learn a different language. And there was a second part of the question, right?

JACK FOSTER: Yeah, what was your process of revision?

SONJA LANG: Right, yeah, like different versions. I think at first I was just trying to simplify things. There was a point where I had separate words for easy and good. Then I was like, ‘You know what? Good things are easy and easy things are good, so it’s gonna just be *pona* for both simple and good. I started merging things a lot and that was one of my tools. Trying to have fewer and few words by just merging concepts until I felt satisfied that this had enough expressive power, and it was just vague enough that it would work.

RIVER SMITH: You guys talked a bit about *nimi sin* earlier. Do you feel that there is a point where the community almost overuses it and goes against the original purpose of Toki Pona to an extent?

LAKUSE: *nimi sin* are new words.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, new words. So there’s sort of like the original words that I created... There’s different versions of Toki Pona. There’s the version that was published on the web in 2001, the version from my first book. People keep inventing new words. Does it go against the original purpose of Toki Pona? Kind of. But at the same time, Toki Pona is about expressing yourself. So if there is a thing that you really feel is important, that you need a dedicated word for it, I’m never gonna say ‘No,’ or stop someone from having fun or whatever. So I think, yeah, the speaker is empowered to use new words or not, and it’s at your own risk. If you use a new word that no-one’s ever heard of it’s like... It’s like the same in English. We have new words in English for new technologies, new social concepts, new political things or new events. Sometimes they become necessary, or sometimes people go, ‘What do you mean?’ and you have to explain what the word means. Do you have an opinion, Lakuse?

LAKUSE: Yeah. I think people, when they first hear about the concept and they hear about new words, I think there’s an anxiety that comes with that. Like ‘Oh, well Toki Pona is inevitably going to grow. You start off with 120 words, now you’re 137, next day it’s going to be 8,000! I think there’s a misunderstanding there. While there is a lot of people who use *nimi sin*, there’s an equal force within the community that sort-of... like, that’s why we learned it in the first place. We always are trying to go for less, so there’s actually people who use less than 120 words.

And I think— and this is just what I find my experience is— the longer that someone is in the community, the less controversial *nimi sin* they tend to use. Also, new *nimi sin* are proposed all the time. There's a really good one recently, *eliki*, which refers to 'pain' but also 'struggle/adversity,' but also, 'disability' specifically. It covers an area Toki Pona I don't think was really prepared for. So this person, in order to articulate their experience, introduced this word. I think a lot of people are fans of that word. I think *tonsi* as well, when it was first introduced— in Toki Pona, there are three gendered words. There is *meli*, *mije*, *tonsi*, which are masculine, feminine, and then trans/non-binary. So that trans/non-binary word wasn't in the original draft but the community has embraced that almost to the extent where lots of people 'believe' that it's invisibly written in *pu*, with invisible ink. If you shine the right UV light there, you'll probably find it! So different *nimi sin* definitely... there's a lot of them that get proposed and thrown away. And also a lot of joke words! There's a joke *nimi sin* called Pingo. So 'go' is an illegal consonant, we don't have 'g' in Toki Pona. You spell Pingo with a capital P that doesn't exist anywhere else in the language, and it only means 'car.' [Audience laughter]. So a lot of *nimi sinnery* is just like that.

SONJA: Yeah, a lot are memes or inside jokes. But part of the design of Toki Pona, the nature of it is such that by introducing a new word, then it takes away from the expressive power of the established words that already cover some of those meanings. The absence of a word in Toki Pona is sort of intentional sometimes and adding a new word... like, a controversial one might be *isipin* for 'to think.' It's like, 'Oh, but we already had lots of ways of describing different ways of thinking, like *toki insa* or *pilin*, or depending on context, different things.

LAKUSE: *isipin* is an interesting one because *toki*, in the original *pu* definition, one of the definitions for that is literally 'to think.' So like, why do we need that? There was a lot of pushback. An interesting one that I like is *soko*. It's fungi, or mushroom network. There is a word, *kili*, which initially has the word 'mushroom' in its definition. It's for any sort of fruit, any sort of vegetable, and any sort of mushroom. But I was talking with a friend, and this is the friend who invented the word. They were saying, "Well, when you think about it, truly the function of most *kili* and the function of most *soko* or mushrooms are completely different. *kili* are there to reproduce, *soko* is there to decompose. *soko*, as well, have their own sort of mycelium network. They're quite mysterious. Like, we don't really know much about mushrooms. They merited, to them, being described under a whole other experience. As if to put that into *kili* was almost like a slight against the fungal species as a whole. [Audience laughter].

SONJA LANG: But also like 'fruiting body' is a term in mycology, so there's that.

LAKUSE: Isn't that a lexicalization, or a calque?

SONJA LANG: I guess, yeah you're right. I'm a fan of *soko*. I mean, I added, in my most recent book 'The Wizard of Oz,' 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,' there was a point where I was like, "Oh! I haven't used *soko* yet. I'm just gonna add a *soko* here." [Audience laughter]. I just added a

thing that said, 'There are mushrooms in the forest,' and then the story continues. I just wanted the mushroom included.

CAEDIN COOK: From a conlanger perspective, how did you go about growing the Toki Pona community, and how would you recommend aspiring conlangers to find speakers for their conlang, and to build that community?

SONJA LANG: That's a hard one for me to answer because I didn't do very much. Like, I kind of just put it out there, and then people found it and it kind of took off. It's not like I went around advertising. I usually avoid interviews and things like that. I'm kind of like... I think I was just lucky, or maybe it was the right place at the right time, or it was just something that was new. I mean there were other constructed languages at the time, like Esperanto or Lojban or... I don't know what else had speakers at the time. But maybe Toki Pona was just so different and new that, on its own merit, it attracted people? I don't know.

CAEDIN COOK: You say it grew on its own, how were you involved in promoting its growth? Or like you said, have you just turned the community over?

LAKUSE: I guess the books.

SONJA LANG: Books, yeah, I guess books.

LAKUSE: I mean, they sorta made you write the first book. There basically was a ten-year promise. They were like, "Where's the book, Sonja? We're waiting for the book!"

SONJA LANG: That's true.

LAKUSE: And they sorta bullied you into making it.

SONJA LANG: But it's also mutually beneficial for a creator to create the work and... yeah.

LAKUSE: I feel like you're almost cursed by it in a way.

SONJA LANG: Yeah?

LAKUSE: The rest of us can leave the community if we ever wished. But your name is stamped on the Wikipedia page.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, I'm permanently...

LAKUSE: Within the community, we have talks about how do we get more people to join the community. And I'm not good at that. Some people are really good at it. Some people have developed like, "How to speak about Toki Pona so that people don't think you're insane!" [*Audience laughter*]. But I think literally, you have to strike lightning. And I think that what I've

found is that people, while a lot people are attracted by the hook, people stay for the community. So I think you have to get out there and make friends, and your friends are more likely to learn your language than strangers are. I mean, initially you proposed it to a group of people who knew you.

SONJA LANG: Yeah. Like at first, I was maybe sharing Toki Pona to my friends, like a roommate, or people I knew in the Esperanto community, and so there were some speakers. But very quickly, early on, it reached a point where I was like, 'Strangers are coming to me and speaking the language that I thought was only in my head.' And it's like, oh wow! It's real, and it brings us together.

CAEDIN COOK: Well, thank you.

SONJA LANG: Do we want to take an audience question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER A: Yeah, I just wanted to interject on this. [*Mic is passed*] Oh okay, thank you! Hello! I want to interject on this question specifically because I've been thinking about this too. I really like this language a lot and I expect to share it with people. I'm 32, so I don't know. I'm from a slightly different generation, a lot of my friends are around the same age. And I feel like the problem is a lot of them just don't have time, which really surprises me. Because even for such a quick language to learn—like, I've learned the language but for the most part I still have trouble speaking it quickly— it probably took a week or something to learn all the words, and then I don't know, an extra two weeks or so to get the writing and understanding the symbols and everything? It really doesn't take that much time. To be showing friends and family... they think it's cool. They don't think it's an awful idea or something, but a lot of them still just don't have time. I wonder and I was thinking about what kind of people might typically have the time to learn it. I'm not sure if it's a specific people that you can find online maybe. Or, I was thinking people who are more like, retired, like older people. Or young middle schoolers who are wanting to learn a cool new language so they can communicate with each other.

SONJA LANG: Like a secret language.

AUDIENCE MEMBER A: Yes, a secret language idea. So I don't know. And there are some people who are my age and are kind of busy, but they still want to learn it. But it's hard to find that group of people who are actually going to take the time to do it which is surprising to me too, because it's still so much less time than any other language. But I just wanted to share that. I don't know if you guys have anything to add.

LAKUSE: I appreciate your contribution. I can relate to this a lot. I'm not necessarily a Toki Pona evangelist, but I do want to have people in my same town who speak Toki Pona, because that will be nice. I don't have to pay as much to fly to other places [*Light laughter*]. No, but as I said at the top of my talk. Really, there are people who just won't be interested in this kind of thing. But there will always be a kind of people who just have... who will feel magnetized to it. I really think it's the luck of the draw there. In terms of if you're looking to learn this language in a very



quick amount of time, just on your off time, what I've done is print off a... there's a Toki Pona cheat sheet if you just look up 'Toki Pona cheat sheet.' It's one page online, you'll get a very handy PDF. I print that out and have it on my dining room table and every time me and my father eat, I just quiz him on a few words here and there. Sometimes then, to me that's just enough.

SONJA LANG: I feel like Toki Pona people find Toki Pona and it's just like destiny almost, and for the people who are not into it, I don't want to force you to do an activity that's not your cup of tea.

LAKUSE: Unlike other constructed languages, well not other languages but I think like Esperanto, at least in the beginning had a very clear goal in trying to recruit more speakers. I don't think Toki Pona is necessarily oriented that way.

SONJA LANG: It happens on its own.

LAKUSE: It happens on its own, it happens very naturally. I don't think I've met a fluent Toki Pona speaker who's been forced into it. It's all voluntary.

SONJA LANG: It's all for fun.

LAKUSE: I appreciate the expression of 'Oh, we should make this a bigger thing! Why doesn't everyone learn this!' But I think really, it's a certain kind of magnetism. You feel that power, when not everyone does. And that's fine.

KIRA HALL: Any other questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER B: Hi. Building on this a little bit, I'm 67. I've been at it two months. I had a stroke so I don't speak my own language that well anymore. But what I was really impressed by in Toki Pona is the fact that the consonants and vowels are so accessible to all the people, spreading your language around the world. And when you hear people speaking it online, you could not ever guess where they're from. That's brilliant.

SONJA LANG: Yeah that was intentional. Because I spoke Esperanto at the time, and Esperanto has a lot of consonants that are taken from Polish that are hard to pronounce. There's like /ʒ/ /dʒ/ and /ʃ/ and I was like, 'No, we're gonna just use very few consonants, very few vowels and they're gonna be the ones that are present in many, many many languages.' Yeah, it's like an accessibility thing and it takes away... you know, there's no L/R distinction, it's just, you can... yeah!

AUDIENCE MEMBER C: Hello, I was just wondering what is you guys', as speakers, personal processes if you encounter a word that you want to translate and—

SONJA LANG: Sorry, I didn't hear the beginning. Can you start again?

AUDIENCE MEMBER C: Okay. You, as speakers, how do you approach a word that you've never encountered before. How do you chop it up and translate each part?

SONJA LANG: Do you mean if we're speaking *in* Toki Pona and there's a new word *in* Toki Pona? Or do you mean if somebody says, like 'train station' and I'm like oh... *in* Toki Pona?

AUDIENCE MEMBER C: You know, if I was trying to describe, let's say tteokbokki, right? I would say that's a food that anyone... I would feel like that's not a word that would naturally come about in conversation in Toki Pona. How would you approach describing that?

SONJA LANG: Uh, what was the word again?

LAKUSE: Tteokbokki, like the rice cake thing.

SONJA LANG: Oh I don't know it.

LAKUSE: I could talk about it.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, go for it!

LAKUSE: So as you know, Toki Pona is a very easy language to start. There's a saying in Toki Pona which is 'If I don't know something, then I can't say it in Toki Pona' (*mi sona ala e ijo la mi ken ala toki pona e ona*). So if you just said the word 'tteokbokki' and I had to reproduce 'tteokbokki' to a person, but I didn't know what tteokbokki was, I would be like—

SONJA LANG: Like me, I don't actually know. It's a brand of rice cake?

LAKUSE: It's a kind of rice cake.

SONJA LANG: It's a kind of rice cake, okay.

LAKUSE: So it's like completely, you can't communicate it, so that's an interesting design feature. For me, like... becoming fluent in Toki Pona is training that muscle of saying something, describing, identifying which key parts are I want to use. Because every single word that you say, the skilled speaker you're talking to will also know which words you didn't say. I will often describe Toki Pona as a never ending game of 120 questions where you're constantly going through the possibilities. Some people, if I'm talking to, say, a Korean person, very easily they would pick it up, really fast. To someone who isn't so familiar with East Asian cuisine, it would be a little bit harder. So part of it is training that muscle, describing sort of those key features, another part of it is knowing your audience—

SONJA LANG: I would start with *pan*, like it's a type of carb, and it's like, you could describe the shape, I don't know, is it round, is it flat—?

LAKUSE: Yeah.

SONJA LANG: –and so it's like a round flat, carbohydrate-based–

LAKUSE: So tteokbokki, I can describe it to you right now–

SONJA LANG: Do it in english, and

LAKUSE: It's a sort of stick-like object, it's very small, it's about the size of my finger, sort-of be the stick of my hand, it's about the same size, I could talk about how often it's eaten very spicily, like there's a word in Toki Pona–

SONJA LANG: –for flavors, and spices–

LAKUSE: –but often the spice is very red, and it hurts your mouth when you eat it. There are recent trends where people will take a semisolid made of nurturing animal milk and will take this and put this onto the carbohydrate and eat it that way, so–

SONJA LANG: So they're speaking in Toki Pona right now but using English words, so just to...  
[Audience laughter]

AUDIENCE MEMBER C: Got it.

LAKUSE: Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER D: I had a question of how is it possible to join the Toki Pona community if you're interested. Is there a way to join, or..?

SONJA LANG: Yeah, I mean there's no official membership card or anything. But it's like, if you go on my website ([tokipona.org](http://tokipona.org)), it lists a lot of the communities and there's a lot. Discord is the main place that I think Toki Pona happens on, but some people use Telegram, some people use Facebook. Some people use... what else? I don't know. Discord is an important one.

LAKUSE: There's resources on YouTube as well. As I mentioned before–

SONJA LANG: YouTube, yeah.

LAKUSE: You don't even necessarily have to be in community to speak Toki Pona. A lot of people have it as a very personal endeavor. They may start by buying some of Sonja's books and starting from there. There's lots of great free resources out there.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, there's free courses online too.

LAKUSE: And Sonja's website specifically has a lot of them listed right there for you.

SONJA LANG: So I guess my website is a good starting point, tokipona.org. And Discord. Look for links to the Discord. And there's one Discord community that's specifically for beginners, learners, where a lot of experienced speakers volunteer their time as teachers, and just totally help each other out.

EL HAYS: And also the CU Boulder Ling Club is happy to have you if you are from around here. That goes to anyone. We have some Toki Pona speakers. Toki Pona isn't our whole thing, but if you would like a linguistics community or people to speak to in Toki Pona, then you're absolutely welcome to join, we are really nice.

LAKUSE: And yes, I may know a couple of very fluent speakers who also live in Colorado who may be interested in accepting compensation. Mika?

SONJA LANG: What, like a professional Toki Pona teacher?

LAKUSE: Yeah, like I mean you have some community here in Colorado as well. So reach out, network after the event. I'm sure something will come of it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER E: Y'all were talking about the growth of the community earlier. I was just wondering, was there any sort of 'oh shit' moment when the popularity, it's gone beyond you. Anything like that?

SONJA LANG: We discussed this question a couple days ago, but I forgot what we said.

LAKUSE: I think I had my person, 'oh shit' moment of, 'Oh my god, this is a language,' when I heard people speaking fluent Toki Pona orally for the first time.

SONJA LANG: I guess because it's like, 'Oh, it's a made-up language.' So it's just an idea or a theory. But like, 'No, do people actually use it?' 'Do we actually understand each other?' and yeah!

LAKUSE: Yeah, it was... I had my mind boggled. I just had to learn after that. That was my 'oh shit' moment. Because for a long time you didn't have those kinds of audio recordings, people just weren't in contact— it's mostly an internet thing, so internet technology didn't allow as much of that real-time transmission for a real speaking community to pop up. But Discord is something that really helped facilitate that.

SONJA LANG: My 'oh shit moment' was when I was invited to Colorado to speak [*Audience laughter*]

AUDIENCE MEMBER F: I didn't know about this until like two days ago, and I didn't even know you could make up a language. I'm very curious about, either from creating this, and for people who have joined the community and all that; as people interested in linguistics, what it has taught you about language that you didn't know about? Specifically about cultural exchange or how culture comes with the language. When you were like, 'Oh, there's a word for raccoon.'  
*[Pause, burst of laughter]*.

SONJA LANG: Yeah, I don't know either.

AUDIENCE MEMBER F: Like, I grew up in South America, and there are no raccoons. I can't even think of the word 'raccoon' in Spanish. I'm curious about how you saw that. I don't know. I'm like, it's a language, but there's cultural things related to specific words.

SONJA LANG: I don't know. Are you up for it?

LAKUSE: Yeah, so before I joined Toki Pona. I really didn't know much about linguistics. This was my sort of... my entry drug, *[audience laughter]* to the whole world of linguistics. I didn't know the jargon. I really didn't, I didn't know anything. I was sort of bamboozled in this space because people were really throwing out those... it's a Toki Pona community. You could assume there'd be no jargon, we're anti jargon! But they were throwing out jargon.

SONJA LANG: Predicate!

LAKUSE: Predicate! Preposition! All these different words. So for me, and I know a lot of people actually are similarly like that, where Toki Pona triggers not a linguistic curiosity but like a more artsy instinct. And that becomes a gateway into linguistics for them. A lot of Toki Pona speakers go on to create their own constructed language just because they know it's possible. In terms of your latter question about culture and the relationship to that, I don't think there's necessarily a strong relationship between Toki Pona as a language, and Toki Pona as a culture. I think there are Toki Pona cultures that have sprung up over time. Different iterations of speakers have come through a made up their own jokes, made up their own Pingo.

SONJA LANG: People making up their own number systems is a common thing.

LAKUSE: Number systems!

SONJA LANG: People are like, 'Why are the numbers so lacking? I want to reform everything!'

LAKUSE: I think it's like this recently where you get music, for example Toki Pona music I think is probably the strongest aspect of culture. We have really amazing artists like jan Nasi and jan Usawi.

SONJA LANG: Independent artists.

LAKUSE: Independent artists that sort of do their own thing. And in general, sharing art and creating art is a big aspect of it. I don't know of any other language community where you join and immediately start translating songs and posting them to forums with other people looking at them and correcting. It's a very artsy community in that way. But I would hesitate against the instinct to necessarily associate the language with the culture, because this isn't an ethnic language or anything. There's a very disparate connection. I think if you dropped the Toki Pona book into, I don't know, another solar system or something. You'd get a completely different Toki Pona culture.

SONJA LANG: People in their own cultures, I guess.

LAKUSE: Yes, and even now there's the Toki Pona English sphere, Toki Pona French sphere, Toki Pona German sphere, Toki Pona Russian sphere.

KIRA HALL: I mean, I saw so many hands up and I wish we had more time, but there will be time to talk with our two guest speakers after this is over. I think you've probably heard and smelled the food in the back. [*Some people move to the food*] But wait! [*Laughter, fidgeting*] I want to have our closing speaker, Professor Laura Michaelis who's the chair of the department, who's going to share a few words.

### **Closing Comments by Dr. Laura Michaelis [1:15:20]**

You can't do that to me. You mention the taco bar and then say, 'Laura, you can come on down and bore us for a couple of minutes.' Well, I'm going to do that. Tacos can wait.

I guess, I think I was asked to situate Toki Pona in the history of this field. So I want to ask you: What's a language? Well, it's a language according to Noam Chomsky, because we all care about Noam Chomsky! [*Audience laughter*]. Well, I'll tell you, it's pretty elemental. It's a finite number of words, with a finite number of rules of combination. So it's an infinite language from finite means. So according to this definition, Toki Pona is clearly a language. So why do linguists feel so on board when they start learning about the existence of this community and this code? Well one reason is that, we're so used to thinking of language as a product of social interaction, joint attention, reciprocal altruism, theory of mind and all those things that evolutionary anthropologists think language is.

They think that language started diversifying about a hundred thousand years ago but Homo sapiens (there might be some precursors that talked), but Homo sapiens [started to talk] about two hundred thousand years ago. So there was a considerable gap. What filled that gap? Well, some people say gestural language, some people say proto-language, and so on.

When we linguists think of engineered codes, we might suspect some sort of nefarious social project, like Newspeak in the book *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, which was written in, somebody got it? [*Audience member calls out "1948"*]. So Newspeak had an intent, and that was to make certain

concepts inexpressible. But you still managed to say stuff like ‘really really bad’ by saying the whole ‘doubleplus ungood.’

So analytic encoding, as we see in Toki Pona, is freedom. There is nothing nefarious about Toki Pona, I can promise you [*Audience laughter*] and Sonja is not ‘Big Brother’ in this. [*More audience laughter*]. I think the idea of Toki Pona is to engage a passion for communication, and even to make it a bit effortful. We’re reminded about what a miracle it is to convey ideas and aspirations, folk stories and humor, and create community. If I had to find a couple of really familiar analogues from linguistics to Toki Pona, I’m gonna think of semantic composition or decomposition, or historic [*indistinct*], it’s the one that makes linguists debate about whether or not ‘killed’ means the same thing as ‘cause to die.’

We can also think of a certain kind of code, and that is the code from *A Strange Planet*, by Nathan Pyle. Some of my students are actually doing a joint project on the language of *Strange Planet*. Nathan Pyles, the creator of *Strange Planet*, creates words for his *Strange Planet* alien family, like the word for coffee, if everyone knows the word for coffee. It’s ‘jitter liquid.’ [*Laughter from audience*]. The word for teeth is ‘mouth stones,’ and the word for alcoholic beverage is ‘mild poison,’ and so on. [*More audience laughter.*] Interestingly, both *Strange Planet* and Toki Pona feel the need for a raccoon word, and the raccoon word in *Strange Planet* is ‘greyscale finger bandit.’ [*Audience laughs*]. So clearly, although the word raccoon is monomorphemic, it’s opaque, there’s an urge, and it’s found in Toki Pona as well.

It’s the idea of analytic encoding that explodes out of... it pulls out its conceptual guts and lays it bear for our consideration. That’s a very liberating act. So in that sense, I believe Toki Pona is a liberating ideology. It evokes metaphor and autonomy which our minds are really set up to do. At this time, Toki Pona is much the same. As I know the language, it’s not a creative conlang like one that, you know, is reported to represent the social practices of the Klingon community. It’s *anybody’s* community. It has a real community, and that community has the same patterns of prescriptivism and language controversies as any other. So, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson, who I kinda like, Toki Pona speakers all living today are collectively in an imagined community. And what that means is while they may never meet or interact with all of their fellow Toki Pona speakers, although they may try, in their minds all lives the image of their communion. And at that level I think this is a tremendous social project and I commend everybody who’s involved in any way.

### Event Conclusion

DR. LAURA MICHAELIS: Taco bar, what was I supposed to say about the taco bar? [*Audience chuckles*]. There’s book signing! And I’d also like to thank the wonderful Kira Hall for organizing this whole event. [*Audience claps, whooping*]

DR. KIRA HALL: So please, have community!



## The Event Program

### Toki Pona: From Personal Art Project to Small World Language

Undergraduate Distinguished Lecture  
Department of Linguistics  
April 8, 2024, 4-6 pm  
CBIS Room, Norlin 5th floor

#### Featuring

- Sonja Lang (jan Sonja), Inventor of the Toki Pona language
- Chelsea Raacz (jan Lakuse), Toki Pona and Luka Pona Sign Language (LPSL) user

#### Introductions

- Dr. Kira Hall, Assoc. Chair of Undergraduate Studies, Linguistics & Anthropology
- Turner Land, ULA Co-President, Linguistics & International Studies
- El Hays, Ling Club CU Conlang Officer, Linguistics

#### Foreword

- Chelsea Raacz (jan Lakuse), Toki Pona and LPSL user

#### Roundtable

- jan Sonja, Inventor of Toki Pona
- jan Lakuse, Toki Pona and LPSL user
- Olivia Bahr, Linguistics
- Caedin Cook, Computer Science
- Jack Foster, Linguistics & Anthropology
- El Hays, Linguistics
- Tessa Moskoff, Linguistics & Neuroscience
- River Smith, Cherry Creek High School Ling Club

#### Conclusions

- Dr. Laura Michaelis, Chair, Linguistics

#### Reception

- Chipotle Taco Bar

#### Organizers

- Undergraduate Linguistics Association Officers
- Linguistics Club Officers

#### Sponsors

- Department of Linguistics
- Center for Humanities & the Arts



Plaintext English version of Event Program

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## lipu pi tenpo kulupu

**pini la, toki pona li pali musi pi jan wan. tenpo ni la, ona li kama toki pi jan ale.  
tenpo kulupu ni la, jan o toki lon ni!**

tenpo kulupu ni la jan suli o toki tawa jan pi kama sona!  
kulupu sona pi nasin toki li pali e tenpo kulupu ni.  
tenpo kulupu ni li lon tenpo pona. ona li lon tenpo mun pi seli ala, li lon tenpo mun pi lete ala.  
ona li lon insa pi tomo lipu suli, li lon supa sewi.

**jan suli pi tenpo kulupu ni li ni:**

- jan Sonja a! ona li pali e toki pona, li pali e lipu pu e lipu ku e lipu su.
- jan Lakuse a! ona li pali lon kulupu pi toki pona lon kulupu pi luka pona.

**jan ni li open e tenpo toki:**

- jan Kiwa a! ona li jan lawa, li pana e nasin toki e nasin kulupu.
- jan Tana a! ona li jan lawa pi kulupu suli pi nasin toki, li kama sona e nasin toki e nasin pi kulupu ma.
- jan Elu a! ona li jan pi kulupu musi pi nasin toki, li kama sona e nasin toki.

**jan ni li toki e ijo nanpa wan:**

- jan Lakuse a! ona li pali lon kulupu pi toki pona lon kulupu pi luka pona.

**jan ni li kulupu sike, li toki e ijo mute:**

- jan Sonja a! ona li pali e toki pona, li pali e lipu pu e lipu ku e lipu su.
- jan Lakuse a! ona li pali lon kulupu pi toki pona lon kulupu pi luka pona.
- jan Oli a! ona li kama sona e nasin toki.
- jan Kasin a! ona li kama sona e nasin pi ilo sona.
- jan Sa a! ona li kama sona e nasin toki e nasin kulupu.
- jan Elu a! ona li kama sona e nasin toki.
- jan Masoko a! ona li kama sona e nasin toki e nasin pi insa lawa.
- jan Wiwa a! ona li kama tan tomo ante pi kama sona, li jan kulupu pi kulupu musi ona pi nasin toki.

**jan ni li pini e tenpo toki:**

- jan Lowa a! ona li jan lawa nanpa wan pi kulupu sona pi nasin toki.

**kulupu mani ni li pana e moku:**

- ona li kulupu mani suli pi pana e moku pi ma Mekiko. nimi ona li kulupu Sipole.

**kulupu ni li pali e tenpo kulupu ni:**

- jan lawa pi kulupu suli pi nasin toki.
- kulupu musi pi nasin toki.

**kulupu ni li pana e mani tawa tenpo kulupu ni:**

- kulupu sona pi nasin toki
- kulupu sona ni: ona li pana e sona lipu, e sona musi, e toki, e nasin mute a!



lipu pi tenpo kulupu li kepeken toki pona li lon nasin ni: ilo li ken lukin e toki

**pini la, toki pona li pali musi pi jan wan. tenpo ni la, ona li kama toki pi jan ale  
tenpo kulupu ni la, jan o toki lon ni!**

tenpo kulupu ni la jan suli o toki tawa jan pi kama sona!  
kulupu sona pi nasin toki li pali e tenpo kulupu ni  
tenpo kulupu ni li lon tenpo pona. ona li lon tenpo mun pi seli ala, li lon tenpo mun pi lete ala.  
ona li lon insa pi tomo lipu suli, li lon supa sewi.

**jan pali pi tenpo kulupu ni li ni:**

- jan Sonja a! ona li pali e toki pona, li pali e lipu pu e lipu ku e lipu su.
- jan Lakuse a! ona li pali lon kulupu pi toki pona lon kulupu pi luka pona.

jan ni li open e tenpo toki:

- jan Kiwa a! ona li jan lawa, li pana e nasin toki e nasin kulupu.
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- jan Elu a! ona li jan pi kulupu musi pi nasin toki, li kama sona e nasin toki.

**jan ni li toki e ijo nanpa wan:**

- jan Lakuse a! ona li pali lon kulupu pi toki pona lon kulupu pi luka pona.

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- jan Masoko a! ona li kama sona e nasin toki e nasin pi insa lawa.
- jan Wiwa a! ona li kama tan tomo ante pi kama sona, li jan kulupu pi kulupu musi ona pi nasin toki.

**jan ni li pini e tenpo toki:**

- jan Lowa a! ona li jan lawa nanpa wan pi kulupu sona pi nasin toki.

**kulupu mani ni li pana e moku:**

- ona li kulupu mani suli pi pana e moku pi ma Mekiko. nimi ona li kulupu Sipole.

**kulupu ni li pali e tenpo kulupu ni:**

- jan lawa pi kulupu suli pi nasin toki.
- kulupu musi pi nasin toki.

**kulupu ni li pana e mani tawa tenpo kulupu ni:**

- kulupu sona pi nasin toki
- kulupu sona ni: ona li pana e sona lipu, e nasin jan, e sona musi, e nasin mute a!