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The Language of the Draughtsboard Sharks: A Conlang Project

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ENTRY 1. 4.1.20

Dr. Henrison, Dr. Leonard and I arrived at the research coordinates April 1, 2020. Fully prepared for up to a month of dedicated study, we are well-provisioned with MREs, water filtration, and enough gasoline for some light travel around the assigned research location. I've got to say, being the first group of linguists with the opportunity to study such groundbreaking work as actual verbal language in sharks is thrilling, to say the least. Looking forward to keeping this journal updated.

ENTRY 2. 4.14.20

It appears that preliminary research is correct; there are indeed draughtsboard sharks in this area and they are, in fact, communicating verbally. I've included the initial write-up that I am sending back to base below. Will update and revise as more information becomes available.

Deep within the oceans of New Zealand resides a particularly interesting species of shark: the draughtsboard shark. These unique creatures are able to suck water or air into the cardiac sphincter in the stomach when threatened, causing the shark to swell up to three times its normal size. When above water (generally after being hooked and pulled above the surface of the water), the shark will inflate with air instead of water. This air is then exhaled through the gills and has been known to produce a doglike barking sound.

Thousands of years into being hunted, the draughtsboard sharks began to evolve organs that would eventually make speech possible. Today, the shark is fully equipped with active articulators such as a glottis, a velum, and vocal cords that are necessary for their newly evolved means of producing egressive language. It does not have lips or a uvula.

Because of their means of producing sound being so anatomically unique to their species, draughtsboard sharks are only able to use it with each other. Humans and other sound-producing animals are physically unable to even attempt to produce the same sounds that the sharks do. One reason why is that the sharks do not have a tongue, so variation in speech sounds generally occurs in glottal stops and movement between the oral and nasal cavities.

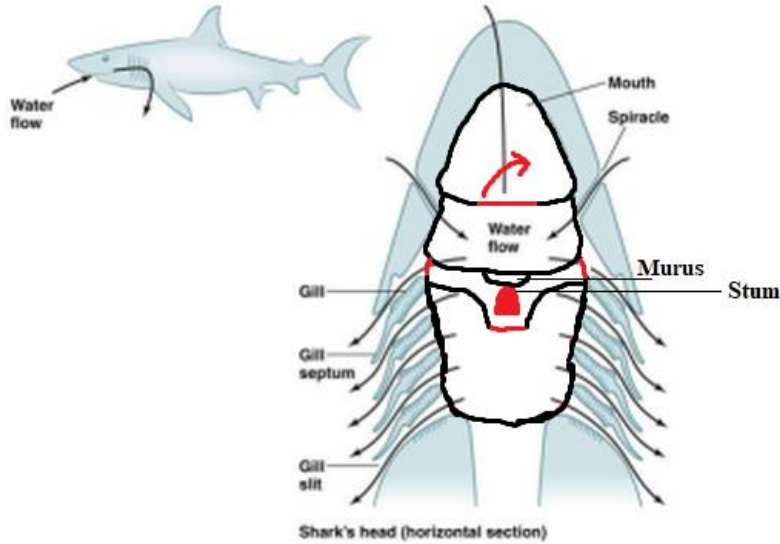
The sharks only use this language above water because a requirement for them to be able to speak is to get a nice sphincterful of air. Thus, it isn't uncommon to see a school of the sharks hanging out at the surface of the water conversing.

ENTRY 3. 4.16.20

Today was enormously successful. We managed to net one of the sharks and bring it aboard our vessel early this morning. We are calling him S1, or Subject 1. Unoriginal, I know, but Dr. Henrison chose the name. Obviously, we need him to be alive for as long as possible in order to obtain speech samples. S1 isn't speaking yet, but hopefully that will change in the next couple of days.

ENTRY 4. 4.19.20

S1 still isn't speaking, but we were still able to make an enormous amount of progress in terms of understanding the physiology of these sharks. Dr. Leonard stunned the shark and I was able to start gathering some information using surgical tools and cameras inserted into the mouth, gills, and nostrils. Below is the anatomical diagram we have put together thus far:



The red represents active articulators, currently the glottis and velum. The air is pulled through the spiracle into the oral cavity (the middle of the three cavities). Once there, it is released through the gills and the sound produced is determined by whether or not the glottis and/or velum are open or closed. If the glottis is open, the air escapes through the remaining 9 gills voicelessly. When the glottis is closed, it buzzes and allows for more manipulation of speech sound. The velum being closed contains the sound to the oral cavity, but an open velum allows air access into the nasal cavity. The murus and stum are both in the oral cavity, and manipulate air once it's inside the shark in order to produce mural and stumal sounds.

I've also taken the liberty of putting together the beginnings of an IPA chart, as we begin to plan on figuring out how the sharks put sentences together. It's a miracle that we have been able to gather this much information in such short time; we are very thankful to have a talented linguist like Dr. Leonard on our team.

	Mural	Stumal	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
--	-------	--------	--------------	---------	-------	--------	------------	---------

Plosive								ʔ
Nasal					ŋ			
Trill								
Tap or Flap	T	r						
Fricative				ç, j	X, ʎ		ħ	h
Lateral Fricative								
Approximant			ɹ					
Lateral Approximant								

Murus - An organ similar to a human alveolar ridge, with one key difference: it's located in the gastric sphincter and serves as a ridge or fleshy wall for the stum to tap against. The murus is an inactive articulator.

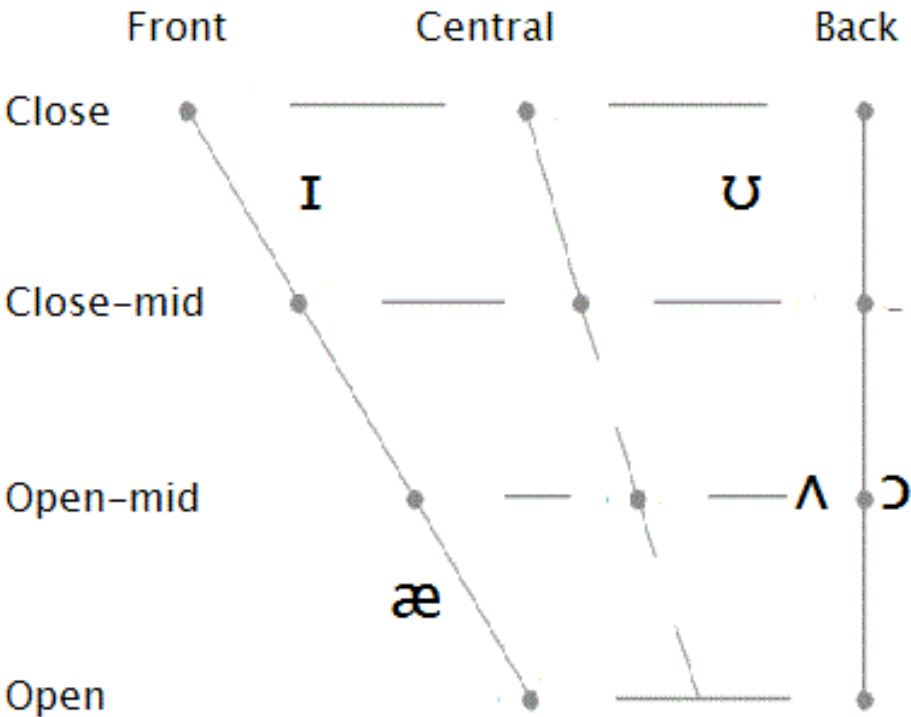
Stum - An active articulator similar to a tongue, but located in the gastric sphincter. On top of being a speech organ, the stum also pushes food from the gastric sphincter into the stomach and prevents said food from coming back up.

Because the shark doesn't have lips, it cannot make sound labially. For convenience, I have replaced the labial section on the IPA sound chart with "stumal" sounds and the alveolar with "mural" sounds.

ENTRY 5. 4.26.20

We got S1 to speak shortly after the last journal entry and since then we have been too busy compiling information for me to keep this journal as updated as I would like. He doesn't seem very cooperative so we moved him to a detainment chamber built into the side of our research vessel. The walls are too high for him to jump over, but we thought we could perhaps catch him communicating with his friends and we are right. If we are correct in what we are hearing thus far, they don't seem to be talking about much aside from fish and "the enemy", whoever that is. On the upside, we don't need to feed S1 anymore as the other sharks have taken to flinging fish up over the side of the chamber. Below are some more charts and information of what we have gathered so far:

Vowels



Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a rounded vowel.

Nouns

When it comes to nouns, æ is used as a prefix in order to establish plurality. Plural nouns and verbs are the only words with more than one syllable in this language. Not all words have vowels; some are just monosyllabic series of consonants.

Examples: [æçʌʔ] = humans [çʌʔ] = human
 [æɾT] = fish (multiple) [ɾT] = fish (singular)
 [æTɔX] = enemy [TɔX] = enemies

The sharks put either the word “[ʌX]” or “[ʌT]” before a word that they want to make either negative or positive, respectively. They will also use each word alone as “no” or “yes”; again, respectively.

They also use exclusively proper nouns to refer to each other, so pronouns don't really exist. The sharks indicate possession by putting the name with possession before the noun receiving the

action; in English, this would look something like the sharks saying “John hand” instead of “his (John’s) hand”.

Verbs

Every word is monosyllabic except for verbs and plural nouns. Verbs always have two syllables, the first containing the content of the word and the second indicating tense. The sharks only deal with three tenses: past, present, and future. Everything in between is of no concern or necessity for their simple, two-dimensional lifestyle and is thus not a part of their language. Each of past, present, and future tense get their own syllable tacked onto the end of the word, as seen in the chart below:

Each suffix follows the formula of [ɔ] + [(appropriate suffix)]

Tense	Syllable (suffix)
Past tense	ɔT
Present tense	ɔη
Future tense	ɔX

[γɪXɔT] = swam

[γɪXɔη] = swim

γɪXɔX = [will swim]

Adjectives

Adjectives follow the noun they modify.

[ɾΛX] = red [ɾT] = fish [ɾT] [ɾΛX] = red fish

Prepositions

Prepositions are treated very similarly as adjectives; in most cases, any phrase or word that modifies the head noun will follow that noun.

[ɾΛX] = red [ɾT] = fish [ɾT] [ɾΛX] = red fish [Λʔ] = with [γΛʃ] = fin

[ΛT] [ɾT] [ɾΛX] [ΛT] [Λʔ] [γΛʃ] [ɾΛX] = “the red fish with the red fin”; a literal translation would be “yes fish red yes with fin red”. When using prepositions like “with”, as can be seen in this example, they are always introduced with either the positive “[ΛT]” (yes) or the negative “[ΛX]” (no) in order to determine if it is a “with” or “without”.

Syntax

The sharks use SVO, similarly to English.

They do not use conjunctions; they just group together the nouns they are talking about back to back rather than use “and”, for example. For sentences that follow a “if this, so that” format, the sharks will use the word “γIT” to indicate causality. The word “but” is replaced with their usage of the word “not”.

“*name* *name* *name* [γIXɔT] [ΛT] [Λʔ] [rT] [rΛX] [ΛT] [Λʔ] [γΛj] [rΛX]” translates to “*name* *name* *name* swam with the red fish (singular) with the red fin” or literally “*name* *name* *name* swam yes with fish red yes with fin red”. This is a sentence describing how three specific sharks swam with a red fish with a red fin.

FINAL ENTRY. 5.6.20

I am not going to be able to make another entry. After my last entry, everything went south. These sharks are much smarter than we thought they were. One of them somehow got onto the boat and took all of our food on 4.28.20. We were sleeping. I don’t know how it did it. The camera caught it. They must have evolved bigger lungs or something because the thing was flopping around on the ship for a good thirty minutes before it found the cooler with the MREs in it. When we woke up the next morning, S1 was making some sort of laughing sound.

I’ve sealed myself in the engine room. I think that Dr. Henrison is dead. I heard him scream a couple of hours ago and then the sharks started making that horrible laughing sound again. To make things worse, I fear that Dr. Leonard joined forces with the sharks. She seems to have fully mastered their language and was walking the boat freely surrounded by flopping sharks last I saw her. I don’t understand how this is possible. Some of their sounds shouldn’t even be replicable by humans.

I don’t have any food or water. Even now, I can hear them outside of my door. I am going to try to reason with them. Goodbye.