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Sonja Lang: The Rhetorical Superhero of Constructed Languages

When they hear the word “superhero”, most people immediately think of comic book characters such as Superman or Captain America. These characters easily fit the definition of superhero in many people’s minds; but when a little more thought is put into listing superheroes, many more nontraditional answers will arise. Perhaps some of these answers include people whose superpowers manifest in the form of rhetoric. Someone who is rhetorically heroic uses rhetoric for the good of the people in an influential and inspiring way: they must be able to use rhetoric effectively and accurately to communicate their message to their audience. Therefore, a rhetorical superhero has to have a superb understanding of language and its components. An admirable example is Sonja Lang, with her utilization of rhetorical devices *kairos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, she has become a linguist well renowned in the constructed language community for her creation of the language Toki Pona.

Sonja Lang, formerly known as Sonja Elen Kisa, was born in 1978 in Moncton, Canada (Elen Kisa). Throughout her childhood, Lang was exposed to many different languages: she grew up speaking French and English at home and after college, she was fluent in five languages. In high school, one language Lang became fluent in was Esperanto (Broholm). Esperanto was constructed by L.L. Zamenhof with the intent for it to become a universal second language, for it

to bridge the gap in communication between people from different countries. This international auxiliary language sparked her interest in linguistics, leading her to pursue multiple professions, including translating and interpreting as well as being an author. Lang began creating her own constructed languages for self and philosophical exploration, creating languages inspired by Dadaism and Taoist philosophies. Lang is most notable for her constructed language Toki Pona: a philosophical artistic language, translating to “the language of good” which she created during a battle with depression as a means to simplify her thought processes.

One key ingredient to Toki Pona’s popularity was Sonja Lang’s kairos when she published Toki Pona on GeoCities, a popular web hosting service in 2001: a time when the internet was considered new and revolutionary. During the early stages of the web, roaming various forums and websites was a common pastime, and over 60 million computers, just in the United States, had the possibility of coming across Toki Pona at the time, around a 50 percent increase from the number of computers owned in 1998. It is evident that in 2001, computer usage was on the rise and the need to escape to the World Wide Web from the complexities and challenges of the real world was an actuality for many and an innovative language that encourages positivity and simplicity was a perfect distraction. It offered a way for people searching for human connections to communicate with others to interact in a new way that didn’t remind them of the overwhelming nature of the physical world. Since its beginnings, Toki Pona has managed to reach many unexpected places, such as the immensely popular video game Minecraft, where it is offered as an optional language for players (Mojang). This inclusion in a widely played and beloved game further solidifies the language’s presence in the world, even over 20 years since its inception. Additionally, Toki Pona’s community is still thriving as

thousands of speakers of the language all over the world congregate on multiple internet platforms such as Reddit where the Toki Pona subreddit has around 17 thousand members (“Reddit”). Reddit has also been the birthplace of many “tokiponidos”—constructed languages based on Toki Pona—such as Kokanu, originally called Toki Ma, which aims to be an international auxiliary language like Esperanto instead of building off of Toki Pona’s artistic and philosophical goals (ShevekUrrasti).

Toki Pona’s appeal extends far beyond its timely introduction, its pathos in particular is what initially intrigued many, from nomads of the internet to long-time members of the constructed language community. Sonja Lang created Toki Pona to be a lighthearted and “cute” language that encourages simplistic and positive thinking (Lang, *Toki Pona: The Language of Good*). One of Toki Pona’s defining traits is its logographic writing system *sitelen pona*. In this writing system, each word gets its own basic, almost childlike symbol, highlighting the language's emphasis on simplicity and a return to fundamental concepts. These words in Toki Pona have a simple syllable structure of optional consonant + vowel + optional final nasal sound. This syllable creates an absence of consonant clusters and diphthongs in the language, contributing to its ease of pronunciation nonetheless ensuring variety in the language's phonotactics. Moreover, the syllables of these words are made up of phonemes that exist in most languages—making the language easy to pronounce for the majority of the population—and by avoiding consonants that are articulated in the back of the mouth or in the throat which many people would consider harsh sounding. This selection aligns with the language's aim to evoke a sense of warmth and amiability. These deliberate design choices are a testament to Sonja Lang's

commitment to creating a language that promotes simplicity and a positive outlook on communication and life.

After being drawn in by the aesthetics of the language, Toki Pona's *logos* is what makes many learners of the language cling to it. The language is intuitively designed to be minimalist in all aspects: phonology, semantics, and lexicon. Toki Pona's phonological inventory consists of nine consonants and five cardinal vowels. Combined with its simplistic syllable structure, Lang also aimed to keep the Toki Pona's lexicon as small as possible, with a current total of 137 words (Lang, *Toki Pona Dictionary*). According to Lang, the language is meant to “break down advanced ideas to their most basic elements”, for example, “tired” in Toki Pona is *wile lape* literally meaning “wants sleep”. This approach streamlines communication and encourages users to express their perspectives with clarity. In turn, Toki Pona prompts users to see from other people's viewpoints. For example, the language has no word for “ocean” so one person may communicate ocean as *telo pimeja en pilin moli* or “dark and scary water” while another person may simply say *telo suli en laso* or “big blue water”. This encourages users to embrace diverse interpretations and to be mindful of their own perspectives. The language's design inherently fosters a focus on the essentials of communication and encourages users to ponder life's positive and fundamental aspects. Sonja Lang's creation of Toki Pona not only offers a novel approach to language but also promotes a thoughtful and simplistic outlook on the world and life.

In the world of superheroes, where extraordinary abilities often involve physical feats, Sonja Lang emerges as a different kind of hero, wielding the powers of rhetoric and language where Toki Pona, serves as evidence, effectively utilizing *kairos*, *pathos*, and *logos* to craft a language that inspires simplicity and positivity. By publishing Toki Pona in 2001, during the

internet's early stages, Lang harnessed the kairos of the digital age, reaching a growing online community eager for inventive distractions. The language's pathos stems from its lighthearted nature, encouraging users to embrace simplistic and positive thinking. Its unique ideographic writing system and phonetics designed for ease of use further amplify the pathos, evoking warmth and affability. At its core, Toki Pona's logos lies in its minimalist design, from semantics to lexicon and phonetics. With just 137 words and a focus on breaking down complex ideas into fundamental elements, the language invites clarity in communication, inspiring users to see the world from varied perspectives. Toki Pona is not merely a linguistic creation; it's a beacon of thoughtful and simplistic living, a testament to the rhetorical superhero, Sonja Lang who inspired many others to follow their passion for the study of languages.

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