

Question Formation in Klingon
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 Ling 4640 – Syntax
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I. Background to Klingon

In the science fiction universe of *Star Trek*, the Klingons are a fierce race of warriors. Linguist Marc Okrand was commissioned by the creators of *Star Trek* to create an very foreign and alien language to be spoken by the forehead-ridged beings. The language is fully developed, with a strange and guttural phonology, a wide vocabulary and syntactic constructions capable of expressing quite a full range of linguistic meanings. The official guide to the Klingon language (in Klingon, **tlhIngan Hol**) is Okrand's *The Klingon Dictionary*. A supplementary guide to Klingon phrases and vocabulary can be found in another work by Okrand, *Klingon for the Galactic Traveler*.

Klingon phonology makes some large deviances from that of any terrestrial language. While it is not important to give a full overview of the differences, it may be beneficial to some readers that some of the sounds are explained, in case one wants to pronounce the words given in examples.

b	Same as IPA /b/	r	Same as IPA /ʀ/ (“European” r)
ch	Same as IPA /tʃ/	S	Blend of IPA /s/ and /ʃ/
D	Close to IPA /ɖ/ (retroflex d)	t	Same as IPA /t/
gh	Like IPA /x/ but voiceless	tlh	Close to IPA /tʰ/ (as in Nahuatl)
H	Same as IPA /x/	v	Same as IPA /v/
j	Same as IPA /dʒ/	w	Same as IPA /w/
l	Same as IPA /l/	y	Same as IPA /j/
m	Same as IPA /m/	'	Same as IPA /ʔ/
n	Same as IPA /n/	a	Approximately like IPA /ɑ/
ng	Same as IPA /ŋ/	e	Approximately like IPA /ɛ/
p	Same as IPA /p/	I	Approximately like IPA /ɪ/
q	Same as IPA /q/	o	Approximately like IPA /o/
Q	Roughly identical to /q/ but raspier	u	Approximately like IPA /u/

II. Notational conventions

In the body of this paper, I will use the following conventions:

1. All words used here are taken from *The Klingon Dictionary*, and will not be individually cited.
2. Klingon words or phrases will appear in boldface, their glosses in plain text and their English translation in italics, somewhat following Okrand's convention in his canonical Klingon works.
3. Though a complex tree-diagram theory for Klingon syntax has not been developed, I will make an attempt to diagram many of the example sentences, following the rules of Klingon word formation and syntax as far as is necessary to demonstrate the process of question formation. Without an understanding of Klingon at any meaningful level, and obviously without the assistance of a fluent speaker, I shall restrict my diagrams to the surface-level representations.

III. Sentence construction in Klingon

A basic introduction to the grammar and syntax of Klingon is outlined in *TKD*. Klingon is an OVS language, and depending on the meaning of the verb or other syntactic clues, often the subject can be omitted when it is clear who is performing the action of the sentence. Important to note is that both nouns and verbs take syntactic markers which indicate various constructions.

Nouns take no overt Case; the presence of surrounding words and these suffixal markers serves to indicate the function of the noun in the sentence. Thus, the *v* (little *v*) construction which is postulated to assign accusative Case is not necessary in Klingon. The nominative Case assignment out of T is also unnecessary, and in fact we shall see that Klingon syntax needs no TP at all. In constructions where the subject and/or object is of the first or second person, the pronoun may be left out, and the verbal prefix alone will serve to make the meaning clear. When the argument is of the third person, it is generally overtly pronounced unless clear by context.

Verbs in Klingon can take up to two prefixes and nine kinds of suffixes. In the realm of the suffixes, the order in which Okrand presents them are the order in which they must follow the verb. In order, these are: (1) reflexive (2) volition (3) change (4) cause (5) indefinite subject (6) qualification (7) aspect (8) honorific and (9) syntactic markers. For purposes of this paper, it shall not be necessary to understand all of the types and their differences, but Type 7 and Type 9 verb suffixes are useful in understanding basic meanings of many of the examples in this paper. The others are generally much different than English verb suffixes and are another topic altogether in Klingon syntax.

A rather striking deviation from traditional syntax is that sentences in Klingon do not carry tense. Any temporal information is either conveyed through adjuncts (such as **DaHjaj** *today*, **wa'leS** *tomorrow*, **ben** *years ago*, **po** *morning*, etc.) or via suffixes upon the verb which indicate completion or the status of an action. These suffixes are of Type 7. The simple present tense is conveyed by the absence of a Type 7 suffix. The perfective aspect is represented in Klingon by **-pu'**, and similar in meaning is the suffix **-ta'**, used only when the action was done deliberately (i.e., one intended to perform the action and in fact did so). A meaning similar to the progressive aspect in English is the Klingon continuous suffix **-taH**. A distinction similar to that in the perfective is also present here: **-II'** holds a meaning like that of **-taH** but is only used when the action has a clear or known stopping point and that progress is being made toward that goal.

To understand the meaning of a basic Klingon utterance, take the following simple sentence:

pa'Daq yaS vIleghpu'

room-in officer I-him-see-PERF

I saw the officer in the room.

Adverbial material and other material not directly part of the verbal or subject/object constructions appears at the beginning of the sentence, reflective of the reversed ordering of many other elements in

the sentence as well. While consisting of only three independent words, the sentence above is composed of six morphemes. The first word, **pa'Daq**, is composed of two morphemes: the noun **pa'** *room* and the locative noun suffix **-Daq**. Together the two form the prepositional phrase which would be represented in English as *in the room*. The second word, **yaS**, is simply the word for *officer*. As the object of the verb, it appears before it. The final word in the sentence is the verbal component: **legH** *see*, its pronominal affix, **vl-** *I > him/her*, and **-pu'**, the suffix denoting the perfective aspect. Thus, the final word glosses as “I saw (him),” and, remembering that Klingon is OVS, we get a sentence-level translation of *I saw the officer in the room*.

This introduction to Klingon grammar should be sufficient to understand the construction of questions. There are three types of questions in Klingon, as in English. First, I will look at the construction of Yes/No questions, whose answers in Klingon are either **Hija'** *yes* (another variation is **HISlaH**) or **ghobe'** *no*. Then, I will analyze *wh*-questions and their Klingon counterparts. Finally, I will briefly look at Klingon tag questions. Looking at these various constructions gives us an insight into how a Klingon syntax can be uncovered.

IV. Klingon **Hija'**/**ghobe'** questions

When Klingons ask whether or not an action was, will be, or may be performed, they use a construction analogous in meaning to a Yes/No question in English, with a Type 9 suffix, the interrogative **-'a'**. Most Type 9 suffixes mark the verbal element as a subordinate clause, glossing as *if*, *whether*, *as soon as*, *while*, etc. **-'a'** serves a similar purpose if we consider questions in Klingon to be CPs as they are in English.

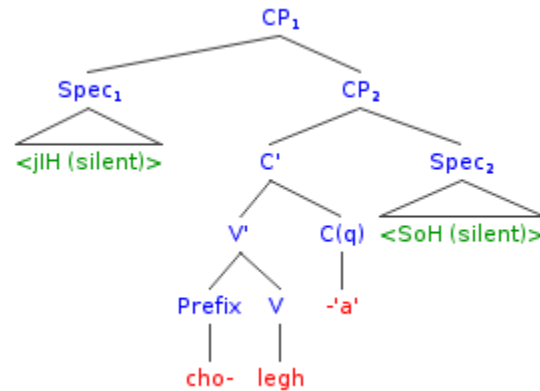
Remembering that sentences in Klingon can be composed of single words, consider the sentence below:

cholegh'a'

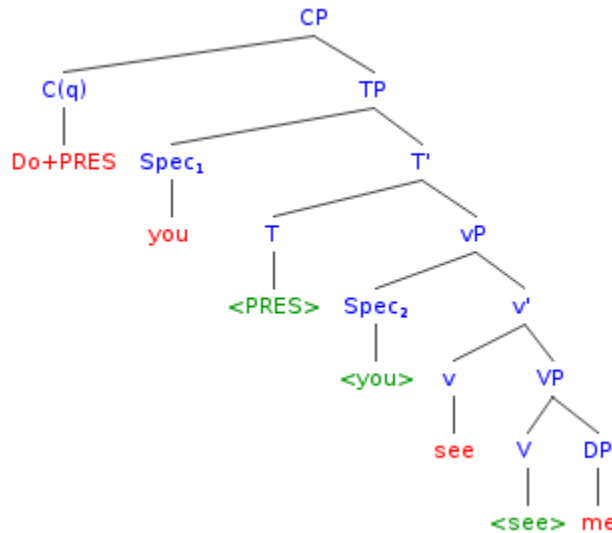
you-me-see-INT

Do you see me?

The following is a tree diagram of the sentence.



Now, consider the same sentence in English.



Notwithstanding the removal of the vP and TP layers from the English, and considering that the SVO order is reversed, we can see very few parallels between the two in the basic underlying structure. Both sentences are CPs, but the structure must be completely different in order to accommodate the strange, alien constructions which Okrand developed to make Klingon seem very alien to speakers of Earth languages.

For instance, the EPP feature on T in English requires that the subject be explicit, and the verb *see*'s lexical entry requires that it have an overt object. However, in Klingon, these parameters do not exist for **legh** (or any verb) and thus the first- and second-person pronouns are left out. We also get do-support in the English sentence while the lack of T-to-C movement in Klingon (since there is no T layer) removes the need for any similar construction.

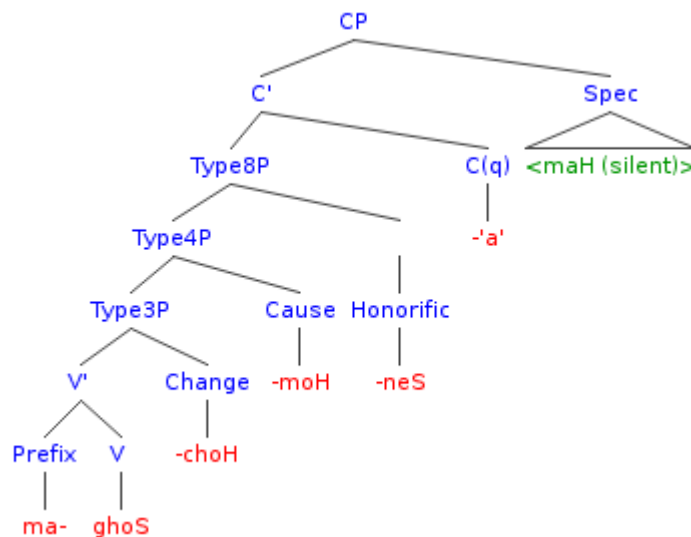
Since the prefix on the verb is both a marker of the subject and the object, I am treating it as part of the core V'. One could argue that there is some kind of agree relation between the subject or object pronouns/nouns (silent or explicit) and the verb prefix, but it seems unclear how such a relationship might take shape. Perhaps the subject merges lower in the tree and moves to its position due to some kind of Klingon Subject Projection Principle. A sisterhood or c-commanding relationship might be at play if this were the case, but further exploration into Klingon syntax is necessary.

Here is a diagram of the more complicated sentence

maghoSchoHmoHneS'a'

we-proceed-CHANGE-CAUSE-HON-INT

May we execute a course?



From this diagram, we can see that there is no object. Also, each kind of suffix gets its own phrase, merged upward in the tree. Type 9 suffixes are labeled here as CPs in order to reflect the close parallel to English syntax. Had there been a Type 7 suffix in this construction, it would have been notated as either PerfP or ProgP, whichever the suffix indicated, and it would have appeared between Type8P and Type6P in the tree.

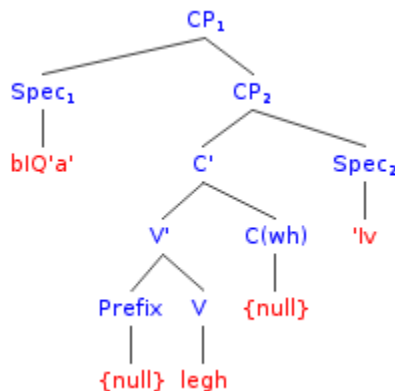
Hija' / ghobe' questions in Klingon are thus CPs, with the interrogative Type 9 suffix **-'a'** filling C(q). No special movement appears to be required to make a Klingon sentence into a **Hija' / ghobe'** question.

V. Klingon *wh*-questions

Similar principles apply when analyzing *wh*-questions in Klingon. First, I must note the appropriate Klingon translations of the English *wh*- words.

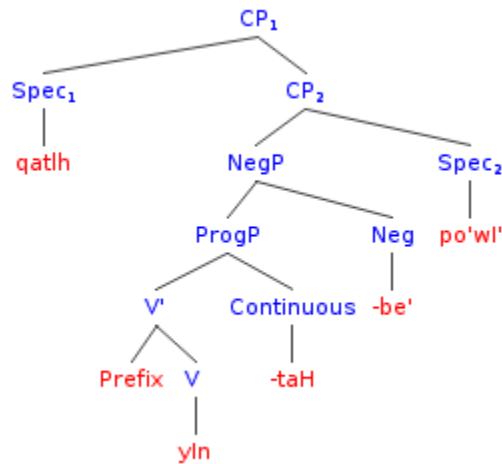
chay' <i>how</i>	ghorgh <i>when</i>	nuq <i>what</i>	'Iv <i>who</i>
qalth <i>why</i>	'ar <i>how many/how much</i>	nuqDaq <i>where</i>	

As in English, the *wh*- words in Klingon merge in the same position as the answer would appear. Both **'Iv** *who* and **nuq** *what* function as third-person pronouns, so the pronominal prefix on the verb reflects the third-person feature of those two *wh*- words (i.e., whether they appear as the subject or the object as appropriate). The following sentence is **biQ'a' legh 'Iv** *Who sees the ocean?*.

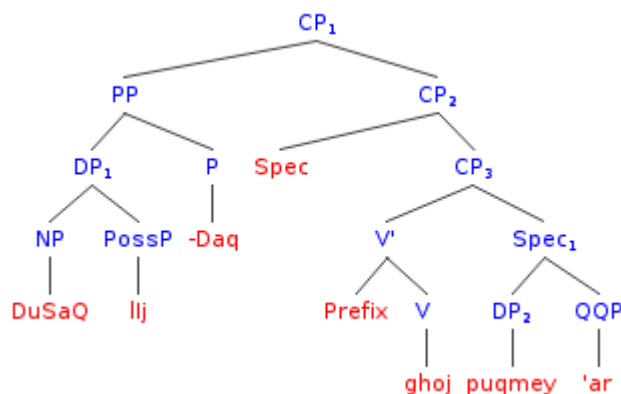


The wh-words which express prepositional or adverbial material (**chay'** *how*, **ghorgh** *when*, **qalth** *why* and **nuqDaq** *where*) all appear at the beginning of the sentence like adjunct material typically does.

Note in particular that **nuqDaq** is just **nuq** what followed by the locative suffix **-Daq**, and thus literally means *in what/on what/at what*, etc. Below, I have diagrammed **qalth yIntaHbe' po'wI'** *Why is the expert no longer alive?*.



Only **'ar** *how many/how much* functions somewhat differently; it follows the noun to which it quantificationally refers. For instance, in the sentence below, we want to know how many **puqmey** *children* attend **DuSaQIij** *your school*. The sentence roughly translates to *How many children learn at your school?*. The QQP heading stands for Quantifier Question Phrase, and is simply shorthand for the *how many/how much* wording.



Though at first these questions appear complicated, with multiple CP layers, it seems as though the layers are all necessary and reflect open spaces where phrases could go. For instance, we could fill Spec, CP₂ above with a school subject, such as **HolQeD** *linguistics*. (**HolQeD** is an addition to Klingon made by Okrand in *Klingon for the Galactic Traveler*.) We might then ask this question if we were at a linguistics conference and wondered the size of other departments: **DuSaQlijDaq HolQeD lughoj ghojwI'mey 'ar** *How many students learn linguistics at your school?*. Also important to note is the structure of possessive constructions like **DuSaQlij** *your school*, as in the above diagram.

VI. Klingon tag questions

Relatively simple compared to the other types of questions are Klingon tag questions. The word **qar** means *be accurate*, and to form a tag question, we simply must add the interrogative suffix **-'a'** to **qar** to form **qar'a'** *Is that accurate?*. Okrand notes that the tag can come at the beginning or the end of the sentence in Klingon, and it does not matter which. It is simply a matter of style. His example begins with the declarative Klingon sentence

De' Sov HoD

information he-know captain

The captain knows the information.

and, by adding the tag to the beginning we might translate the result as *Isn't it right that the captain knows the information?*. Adding it to the end gives us a slightly different flavor of the same meaning: *The captain knows the information, right?*

VII. Conclusion

Though odd and alien to most, Klingon is a treasured artifact of the *Star Trek* universe for fans of the series. A select few manage to learn enough to speak it, but encounters with others who do are few and far between, and most just know a few fun phrases. However, Klingon is a full-fledged

language, and serious linguistic study is not out of the question. The full range of possible constructions in Klingon serves to be an effective tool for aliens in a fictional universe, but it can serve as a useful data mine for linguistic research. Okrand so clearly laid out the rules of Klingon grammar that non-linguists have had no problem understanding them. Klingon's complex morphology makes translation difficult, as it is very hard to tell where one morpheme ends and another begins. Once the morphemes have been deciphered, parsing the sentence into its constituents is relatively smooth; we are guided by the text of *The Klingon Dictionary*. Only the most formal, abstract syntactic level remains to be cracked. It remains a mystery how exactly to translate Okrand's rules into the formal syntax that we use in studying **tera'ngan Holmey** *Earth languages*, but hopefully this look into the various kinds of question formation will help us account for some of the basics.

Reference Works

Okrand, Marc. *The Klingon Dictionary*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.

Okrand, Marc. *The Klingon Dictionary: Addendum*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Okrand, Marc. *Klingon for the Galactic Traveler*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.