

Is Klingon an Ohlonean Language?

A Comparison of Mutsun and Klingon

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Introduction

Klingon is an artificial language designed by Marc Okrand [1] in 1985 for Paramount Pictures Corporation, to serve as the language of the Klingons in the second Star Trek movie and all subsequent Star Trek and spin-off productions. Its best known expression is Qapla' ! = *Success!*

Mutsun (pronounced *moot-soon*, with the short *oo* of *book*, and the *t* and the *s* well separated) was an American Indian language of the Ohlonean [3] (= Costanoan) family, which, together with Tsimshian in British Columbia, the Mayan languages in Mexico, and many others, is part of the Penutian stock. It was spoken until the beginning of the 20th century around Mission San Juan Bautista, just south of San Francisco, Ca. Its last speaker, Mrs. Ascensión Solorsano de Cervantes, died Jan. 29, 1930, at the age of 74. The most accessible work on Mutsun is a grammar produced as a PhD thesis by this same Marc Okrand [2].

So, naturally, the question arises to what degree Klingon was inspired by Mutsun. Already being in the possession of [1] and having recently been able to put my hands on a copy of [2], I set out reading and comparing, in order to find the answer to this question.

Those of you who are just after a juicy bit of gossip will be disappointed: No, Klingon is not more similar to Mutsun than it is to any other American Indian language, neither in vocabulary nor in structure. Those who are interested in the details, read on.

The Comparison

What follows is not an extensive analysis of either Mutsun or Klingon. Both are examined in just enough detail to establish their (non-)relationship. Much more could be said about each of the issues below.

Since Mutsun is known only partially, some features, the existence or precise meaning of which are not certain are marked with ?? in this article.

Klingon looks and feels like an American Indian language. No linguist would be surprised if it had been found among the native languages of California (which in fact indeed it is!), whereas it would have been a bit of a curiosum if found in Eurasia, Africa or Australia. Still, its total alien vocabulary might have drawn some attention. The Proto-Amerind pronouns *ni-* = *I*, and *mi-* = *you*, are immediately recognised in Mutsun *kanni-* = *I*, and *me-* = *you*, but Klingon *jiH* = *I*, and *soH* = *you*, are different.

Both languages are (almost) completely regular. This is rare as languages go, but not unheard of: Turkish is (almost) completely regular too. It is probably easier to design a regular language than a convincingly irregular one.

Sounds

Klingon has the typical American Indian range of consonants, including a lateral plosive *tlh*, a glottal stop *'*, and a set of gutturals and laryngeals *gh*, *H*, *q*, *Q*. Unusual is the *v*, which is rare in American Indian languages and also does not have a non-voiced counterpart in Klingon.

Mutsun is less fiercely American Indian: it has a glottal stop, but no lateral plosives or gutturals (except *h*). It has an extensive set of dental sibilants, though: *t*, *ʈ* (the combined *ts*, as opposed to the separate *t-s* in *Mutsun*), *s*, *ʂ* (a retroflex *t*, as in English *true*), *ʈy* (as in English *tune*), *ʂ* (as in English *church*), *ʂ* (a retroflex *sh*, as in English *shroud*).

Both have the usual vowel set *a*, *e*, *i*, *o* and *u*, with Mutsun distinguishing between short and long vowels, unlike Klingon.

Root formation

The standard Klingon root form is $C_1V[C_2]$. C_1 is a single consonant, V a single vowel, and C_2 is usually again a single consonant. Other possibilities for C_2 are nothing (in which case the word ends in a vowel) or one of the clusters *-rgh*, *-w'* or *-y'*. Examples are: *jol* = *transporter beam*, *qetlh* = *uninteresting*, *bergh* = *irritable*, and *may'* = *battle*, in which *tlh* and *gh* are single consonants.

Although [2] specifies many Mutsun root forms, the predominant ones are CVCVC and CVCCV, with CVC a distant third; one of the vowels can be long. Examples are: heeyes = *beard*, 'issu = *hand*, and koos = *foam*.

Nouns

Nouns do not have gender in Mutsun or Klingon.

The Klingon noun complex consists of a noun stem with, attached to it, a number of suffixes:

noun stem - [small/large] - [number] - [certainty] - [possessor] - [postposition]

in which the postposition is the postfix equivalent of an English preposition. The square brackets indicate optionality of the suffixes: the noun stem must be present, but any or all of the suffixes may be absent. Example:

pa'wIjDaq - in my quarters
pa'-wIj-Daq - quarters-my-in

The Mutsun noun complex has the following structure:

[possessor] - noun stem - [small/large??] - [number] - [postposition / case ending]

Here the last suffix also includes case endings. Example:

men'issutka - on your hands
men-'issu-tka - your-hands-on

Note the different placement of the possessor suffix. The Mutsun pattern is very common among American Indian languages, the Klingon pattern is rare. Indication of number is optional in both languages (see examples above), as it is in many others.

The possessive affixes (prefix in Mutsun, suffix in Klingon) are:

English	Mutsun	Klingon
my	kan-	-wIj
your	men-	-lIj
his/her/its	wak-	-Da j
our	mak-	-ma j
your (plural)	??	-ra j
their	haysa	-cha j

Adjectives

Adjectives are verbs, both in Mutsun and in Klingon (and in many other languages).

Verbs

The Klingon verb complex has the following structure:

subject&object - verb stem - [reflexive] - [volition] - [change] - [causation]
- [indefinite subject] - [certainty] - [aspect] - [honorific] - [sentence classifier]

in which:

- the subject&object is a single prefix, indicating both subject and object. There is a 6 x 7 table in [1], specifying all the combinations.
- the sentence classifier classifies the sentence as a reason (because ..., etc.), a temporal restriction (while ..., at the moment when ..., etc.), a question, etc.

The Klingon verb does not have tenses (past / present / future), but it does express aspect (completed / incomplete, single event / continuous). Example:

nuHotlhpu' 'a' - Have they scanned us?
nu-Hotlh-pu'-'a' - (they-us)-scan-completed-question

The Mutsun verb complex has the following structure:

verb stem 1 or 2 - [thematic suffixes] - [verb ending]

Many Mutsun verb stems consist of two or three consonants, with one or two vowels between them. The system is vaguely reminiscent of but simpler than the Hebrew verb stem forms. The verb stem occurs in two forms, primary and secondary: which one is used depends on the thematic suffix following it. The secondary stem can be derived from the primary, for example:

heyes / heysi - to shave
pasik / paski - to visit, to greet

There is nothing similar in Klingon.

The thematic suffixes in Mutsun express reflexivity, aspect, and direction of motion, like the Klingon verb complex, but the Mutsun suffixes miss much of the construction box nature of the Klingon suffixes. Whereas the Klingon suffixes modify the verb on the spot, the Mutsun thematic suffixes appear to construct new verbs. This is somewhat like the English thematic ending *-le* for verbs, which turns for example *to prate* into *to prattle*. Examples from the motion domain are:

'amma - to eat 'ammati - to walk and eat
hummi - to give hummiti - to treat (to cakes, etc.)

This interpretation may be due to our limited knowledge of Mutsun.

The verb endings in Mutsun express the combination of tense, non-past / recent past / remote past, and active / passive, in a single syllable, as follows:

	active	passive
non-past	-	-hne
recent past	-n	-hnis
remote past	-s	-stap

Subject and object are not expressed in the Mutsun verb. If they are pronouns, the subject is treated as a separate word as it is in English and the object is stuck to the end of the first word in the sentence. The latter construction is unusual, as languages go. Example:

meenwas murṭumpin - you made it black
meen-wa-s murṭu-mpi-n - you(subj.)-it(obj.) black-en-ed

Note that the combination *you-it* is accidental here: the subject is the stand-alone word *meen = you*, and the object *-was = it (obj.)* of *wa = it*, just happens to be stuck to it. Note also that the Mutsun causative thematic suffix *-mpi-* and the verb ending *-n* correspond nicely to the English causative thematic suffix *-en-* and the verb ending *-ed*.

Negation

Klingon negation is indicated by a special suffix *-be'* which can be inserted anywhere in the verb complex and which negates the preceding part. Mutsun has a separate word for *not*, just like German and Spanish (English can only negate auxiliary verbs): *'ekwe = not, No*. Example: *'ekwe me hinne = not you go = don't go*.

Word order

Klingon word order is <object> <verb> <subject>, or OVS, immutably; this word order is very unusual, but is known to occur elsewhere, for example in the South-American Indian language Hixkaryana. Mutsun word order is <subject> <object> <verb>, or SOV, with many ifs and buts; this word order is very common, and is probably the predominant word order of Earth.

Vocabulary

Since [2] does not contain a word list, looking up words in both languages is a bit of a chore. Only a few comparisons follow; they suffice to make the point.

what?	hintis	nuq
who?	hatte	'Iv
when?	hinwa	ghorgh
belt	kuṭra	qogh
leg	kaatyul	'uS
bone	ṭattyi	Hom
fire (noun)	sottow	qul
son	'innis	puqlōD
child	sinni	puq
belly	huttu	chor
hand	'issu	ghop
head	moohel	nach
nose	huus	ghIch
woman	mukurma	be'

one	hemeč'a	wa'
two	'uṭhin	cha'
three	kaphan	wej
four	[utit]	loS
five	parwes	vagh
six	[nakiči]	jav
seven	[takiči]	Soch
eight	tayitmin	chorgh
nine	[pakki]	Hut
ten	[tensaate]	wa'maH

The Mutsun numerals shown between square brackets were missing in the material Okrand had access to, and have been retrieved or reconstructed by Dr. Rich Levy at the request of the Mutsun tribe [4].

Comparison with other American Indian languages

It is of course possible that Klingon derives from another American Indian language, but I doubt it. (Given the structure of the language there is little reason to start looking elsewhere.) It is not spectacularly similar to any American Indian language I have seen, but I have seen only twenty or so (out of some 600).

The most exceptional features of Klingon are its long trail of verb suffixes, its complicated subject/object pronoun table, and its OVS word order.

Several American Indian languages (but few languages elsewhere) feature subject/object pronoun tables (examples are Lakhota and Wichita) but these tables always (?) exhibit a clear internal structure. I have never seen such an irregular and arbitrary-looking table as that of Klingon.

Conclusion

I think Klingon is an independently created language, based mainly on components of a general American Indian nature; Mutsun played a very small role, if any, in its creation. The vocabulary may be totally independent (that is, created at random, using a probability distribution for the phonemes.)

Literature

- [1] Marc Okrand, "The Klingon Dictionary", Pocket Books, N.Y., 1985, pp. 172.
- [2] Marc Okrand, "Mutsun Grammar", PhD Thesis, Univ. of California, Berkeley, June 18, 1977, pp. 350.
- [3] <http://www.ucsc.edu/costano/>
- [4] <http://www.ucsc.edu/costano/mutsunnumberslevy.html>