

VULCAN LANGUAGE INSTITUTE **SHI'OREN T'GEN-LIS VUHLKANSU**

An Introduction to Vulcan Linguistics and the Vulcan Languages Traditional & Modern Golic

**Ragtaya na'Gen-Lis-Tal Vuhlkansu
eh Gen-Lislar Vuhlkansu Ba- eh Iyi-Golik**

One of the most talked about subjects in *Star Trek* fandom is alien languages, especially those of the Klingons and Vulcans. Over the past 40 years, fans of the series have written about a Vulcan language of one kind or another, but most left their work incomplete. Others made things so overly complicated, that few could hope to learn it except insiders. While the first is understandable for amateur fan linguists, the second is arrogant and not in the spirit of what Gene Roddenberry intended *Star Trek* to mean. We strongly feel that the effort has to be honest as well as thorough. Our work since 1980 shows that one does not have to sweat blood (red or green) to learn a Vulcan language.

One major problem is that most writers on Vulcan linguistics approached Vulcan from an Earth of the 20th Century point-of-view. Also, they neglected to consider that there must be more than one major language in use on the planet Vulcan. These people acted as if their language was the only "real" version and refused to accept anyone else's work. We have had people react to us this way. Considering the hundreds of languages on Earth, it is beyond a shadow of a doubt that many languages did and still do exist on Vulcan. We all have to remember that the Vulcan languages are *alien* languages. They are *not* related to any of the languages of Earth! Trying to fit them into a human mold is most illogical. Our research has been conducted as a professional, scholarly project.

Many years ago, in the early days of fandom, the only examples of any Vulcan language were a handful of words from the series and a couple novels. Many fans set out to create a Vulcan language dictionary and grammar. They "filled in the gaps" by creating words consisting mostly of

the letters "S", "T", "P" and "K". Although some of these vocabularies were quite creative, most of them were thinly disguised English or other language words. Much of these early works have disappeared over the years as the authors aged, passed away or official literature made their works "obsolete". Many long-time fans have probably heard of the *Vulcan Language Guide*, a pamphlet published by April Publications in 1977. They were sold via mail and at many conventions over the years. The Vulcan language in that guide is suspiciously similar to Japanese! Several years ago, an acquaintance of ours from Japan, Akira Kawamura, suggested this anonymous work may have been written by a Japanese-American fan! After the release of [Star Trek: The Motion Picture](#) and its spoken Vulcan, further work on their material apparently ended. Despite this, it opened up the eyes of many early fans, including that of our founder and several early members.

The first person outside of our group (that we know of by name) who made an effort with the Vulcan language was Katherine D. Wolterink, a frequent contributor to the old *Trek* magazine and the Best of Trek series of books in the 1980s. In The Best of Trek #10 she presented a Vulcan lexicon. Unfortunately, she insisted on giving it all the articles, pronouns, prepositions, etc., of an Earth language. She twisted the speech from [Star Trek: The Motion Picture](#) to fit. Vulcan languages developed independently from Earth, so cannot follow the same pattern and structure we have here. Also, she thought that Saavik and Spock spoke Romulan together in [The Wrath of Khan](#) (The Best of Trek #7). First of all, it would be a major offense for Starfleet officers to speak an enemy language on board a Federation starship, unless training for an undercover mission in Romulan space. Also, the structure of the transcribed speech was not dissimilar from previous examples of spoken Vulcan. Later, in a chat session, Marc Okrand, famous for his Klingon work, stated that it was Vulcan and not Romulan, since he was the one who came up with the spoken dialogue for that movie! Again, Vulcan is an *alien* language and not an Earth language. Mark R. Gardner, the founder of the Vulcan Language Institute, submitted several articles to *Trek* back then but none were published before the publication disappeared. One of those articles was expanded into this introduction.

The real break in the study of Vulcan languages came with the release of [Star Trek: The Motion Picture](#). In a most wonderful scene, Spock has completed years of the Kolinahr training and is waiting to receive a symbol of total logic for his efforts. We finally are treated to hearing Vulcan spoken in more than single words. Music to the ears for fans of Vulcans! In the next two movies, we are pleased to have additional Vulcan to enjoy. Later

television series episodes and the successful line of novels also added words. We almost decided to ignore the novels, since Paramount Pictures has advised that they do not take anything in the early Bantam or current Pocket books as canon in *Star Trek* chronology or history. Basically, the official line is that all of the novels, unless an "official" novelization of a movie or TV episode, are apocryphal or non-canon. We eventually decided to include some novel words because we felt it was of value in linguistic study. The words are "real" even if the events are considered "fiction" within the *Star Trek* universe!

Why an interest in Vulcan languages? First of all, our founder has been a fan of the show since it first was on. "Amok Time" was a fascinating episode and started him wondering about other facets of Vulcan life, including their language. To Mark, languages have always held a great fascination. Though not exposed to a second language at home, he began to teach himself French at age 9, German at age 11 and Russian at age 16. He also studied Latin, Greek and Middle English. He was an exchange student to Iceland in high school. He learned a lot of Icelandic (little changed from Old Norse) while he was there. It was only logical that he went into linguistics when he joined the U.S. Navy. He completed a year-long Russian course at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, with honors. In the Naval Security Group, he was a transcriber and analyst. He was stationed overseas in Turkey and Scotland. In Turkey he learned enough Turkish to get by in simple conversation; in Scotland he spent so much time off base, that he developed a Scottish accent that confused his fellow Americans! After leaving the service, he started to study such things as Old English and American Sign Language. Mark even spent a year inventing a language that had no irregularities and simplified grammar, based loosely on Old Norse and Old English. It is called Garnik. Should he return to college for a post-graduate degree in linguistics, he plans to use this as the basis of his master's thesis. Other past and present members of the Vulcan Language Institute are also fans as well as linguists.

Only after having studied a number of languages and learned a lot about Linguistics, can one be anywhere near being qualified to study an "alien" language. One does not need a doctorate to do this, just be well-read and open-minded. Mark freely admits that he is no expert on all facets of Linguistics and that's where having intelligent and educated colleagues comes into play. A number of people have come and gone in our organization over the years, adding to the project. One of the most important factors when analyzing any language is understanding the people and culture behind the language. In this case, unless you understand the

Vulcans, you can't explain their language. Vulcan philosophy and language are tied together somewhat. Logic extends into the language. A linguist studying Vulcan languages, especially those in post-Surak use, must also be something of a philosopher.

Transcription of another language into one's own alphabetic system is not an exact science. Anyone who has tried to convert Chinese, Japanese, Greek, Russian, etc., into the Latin alphabet knows what we mean. It is possible to come close in approximating the sound of the other language, but no system has been found that can represent any and every language. This is true with Vulcan languages. After the first contacts between Earth and Vulcan, a system came into use that was convenient to humans but "embarrassing" to the Vulcans. For example, in English, the letter "Y" can be either a vowel or a consonant, but the corresponding character in Vulcan is only a consonant. To express the "Y" vowel-sound in Vulcan you must use the diphthongal "AI", never "Y". It is most illogical to have two ways to express the same sound. (The Bolsheviks on Earth, after the Communist Revolution, dropped "redundant letters" from the Russian alphabet as unnecessary, for example.) Although a later Federation conference adopted a reformed system for transliterating Vulcan into what had become Federation Standard English, you still often see misspellings such as t'hy'la or ka'athya. Old habits are hard to break.

Mark didn't really begin to take a serious linguistic interest in Vulcan languages until he saw [ST:TMP](#) when it first came out. When the Vulcan Kolinahr Master, T'Sai, opened her mouth and out came Vulcan, he was awestruck! It wasn't until after [The Wrath of Khan](#) that Mark began to work with others on a professional analysis of spoken and written Vulcan. He bought the first three movies on the then-superior Beta format and began the arduous task of transcribing the Vulcan spoken in the movies. Since he had done similar stuff in the service, this was old hat. In all, he spent at least 50 hours playing the movie scenes with spoken Vulcan over and over again until he got the phonetic sounds down. Comparing the transcription with facial and lip motions to confirm some vowel and consonant sounds that were harder to hear turned out to be of no use. It turns out that the actors originally spoke in English with exaggerated mouth movements! This was an unexpected surprise. After several years, Mark was finally able to talk to one of the production crew, who informed him that the actors were instructed to exaggerate the way they spoke in order to make it "exotic" sounding. Only later, did the staff dub over the original dialogue with spoken Vulcan for more realism. On one of our pages, you will find a comparison of what was actually said, what was spoken via ADR (ie, voice

dubbing), and what the subtitles said. It is very interesting historically, of course, but we will ignore whatever was originally there for our research, because the Vulcan speech and the subtitles are what we consider the "official" version we've based our work on. As far as we know, we are the only group to know of the exact original dialogue, unless someone has a copy of the shooting script!

Anyway, to make sure that he wasn't hearing things, Mark took an audio cassette of the spoken Vulcan to an acquaintance who was fluent in seven languages and worked as a speech therapist with hearing and speech-impaired people. Mark gave him the tape without telling him what it was and asked him to transcribe it. (If Mark had told him it was from *Star Trek* at the beginning, he probably would have refused.) Mark was very pleased to see that he achieved nearly identical results. They only disagreed on three sounds out of the Kolinahr sequence sentences. Not bad at all! Mark then told him what the sample was and he ran it through a sound analyzer similar to that which is used for voice print comparisons by law enforcement agencies. The last few questionable parts were cleared up when the tape was slowed down and was analyzed sound by sound.

When Mark first began this Vulcan language project, he saw himself putting out a book similar to the first edition of The Klingon Dictionary, Marc Okrand's wonderful book which started the whole Klingon language ball rolling. We also took inspiration from the wonderful Klingon Language Institute, which was formed after we were. We've made a number of attempts over the years at contacting Mr. Okrand and dealing with Pocket Books about this, but eventually gave up the idea after it became obvious there would be no support for anything other than Klingon from the powers that be. Unfortunately, in that online chat session with Marc Okrand many years ago, our founder was unable to get any word in because of all the people on at the time. Amongst our group, we had read every *Star Trek* novel published up to about 2001 (even the hard-to-find non-Pocket Books ones), as well as watched all the movies, the original series, the animated series, and the newer TV spinoffs. We've taken all Vulcan words we could find in writing or in speech and recreated a complete grammar and dictionary of what Gene Roddenberry called "Old Vulcan" in his novelization of **ST:TMP**, but which we gave the general name "Golic Vulcan", because "Old Vulcan" is too easy to confuse with the "Ancient Vulcan" root language. "Golic Vulcan" is actually comprised of two very close languages -- Traditional Golic Vulcan (the formal language of Surak and continuing planet-wide language of ceremony) and Modern Golic Vulcan (a less formal and contemporary version of the same language

which is used as a regional and clan dialect). It has been a very long project and we are still finding an occasional word here and there. At present there are many thousands of words in the lexicon we have assembled. Hundreds of these words are direct from television, novels or the movies. Unlike others, who use random word generators to make up most new words, we have built up the language from word roots using sound language theory. Only in cases where no obvious roots exist did we create Vulcan-sounding words. In this way we are unique.

An analysis of the language of the movies (Golic Vulcan) proves that it is a compounding language -- small words and roots are combined to make new words. Mark and the early contributors broke the words down to their roots and then built up the additional vocabulary from there. This is an example of linguistic "reverse engineering"! (This is based on a technique similar to that which linguists use to decipher ancient texts from fragments of a language.) Some examples of this compounding are: *khaf-spol* (literally "blood-pump") which means "heart" and *ru'lut-masu* (literally "mouth-water") which means "saliva". A number of Earth and other Federation languages also compound like this (or did at an earlier point).

Additionally, our analysis of the Golic Vulcan languages shows they are more phonetically logical in structure than English. There is an alphabetical character for each unique consonant sound and there are five vowels which can combine into diphthongs.

Let's talk briefly about the grammar and structure of the language: One thing you notice right away when you compare the spoken language to the subtitles is that the order of Golic Vulcan is quite different. When you break down the sentence, it is obvious that the verb usually comes first. This is also the case in some Earth languages. But the verb can also move to show emphasis.

Early on, we spent a lot of time looking for patterns, affixes and repetitions. There is no definite article (the) in Golic Vulcan and indefinite articles (a, an) are rarely used! If you really think about it, these are not absolutely necessary -- we are just used to them. The Russian language, for example, doesn't use them and it is quite expressive. As a language spoken by logic adherents, Golic Vulcan dropped parts of speech that were redundant or unnecessary. Here's where most Vulcan analysts make their first mistake -- they try to find definite articles in Vulcan speech. Since they are not there to begin with, the analysts' imaginations take over and they create convoluted systems or invent sounds that just aren't there. We chuckle at some of these imaginary parts of speech. "The" is an Earth concept!

The next thing that some Vulcan analysts try to fit in are prepositions. Yes, Vulcan does have prepositional forms but they rarely stand alone. These "prepositions" usually take the form of prefixes. The best example of this occurs in sentences spoken in **ST:TMP**. There is something that sounds something like "toe Kolinahr" or "tuh Kolinahr" to some fans. This is actually t'Kolinahr. The "t'" is a possessional prepositional part of speech that means simply "of" or "belonging to". (Some people, like Katherine Wolterink and several others, tried to make this "toe" or "tuh" into the definite article "the", which was clever but it does not appear regularly enough to make it work.)

The next thing that some people who analyzed Vulcan did is automatically assume that there has to be a typical English subject-verb-object relationship in Vulcan. Not so! Since the Vulcans are very intelligent and waste of effort is an anathema to them, the subject and/or the object are often dropped from speech when they are implied. Once a subject and/or object is mentioned in conversation, it is not repeated in every sentence unless emphasis is required. Vulcans are more than capable of keeping track of the subject/object currently being discussed.

This omission of words that are implied is even more obvious when it comes to personal pronouns and the like. They exist but are used sparingly because the context of conversation usually implies the possession of an item. If you are talking to another person about yourself and then mention the word for "ball", it is assumed by Vulcans that it is "your own ball", etc. Vulcans grow up with this system and have no problem keeping track of what is whose during the course of a conversation. The grammar section and our lessons have additional information on this.

There are two forms of verbs in Vulcan -- strong and weak. When the language reforms took place around the time of Surak, there was a strong desire to completely revise the language so that all verbs followed the same pattern. Tradition won out over change in a compromise to approve other changes. This was an example of the newly embraced Vulcan belief in logic and the IDIC philosophy. Weak Verbs are formed by taking a word root and suffixing "-tor" to it. These are very common in the Golic Vulcan languages. Examples are *dif-tor* (to live a long time), *zup-tor* (to labor), and *fal-tor* (to rejoin), all three are direct from movie dialogue. The form is the same for all persons. Strong Verbs can be regular or irregular. Irregular Strong Verbs can come in any form, like *estuht* (to touch) or *pstha* (to search), and are usually descended from ancient words. They act the same as Weak Verbs. Regular Strong Verbs always end with the letters "au". In present and simple future tense the verb is the same as the infinitive. In simple past

tense, the ending changes to "al". All three types of verbs are treated the same way in perfect past tense and definite future tense. In the perfect past tense, the verb is prefixed with "ki". For example, *sarlah* (to come) and *ki'sarlah* (has come). In the definite future tense of Traditional Golic (the older form), the verb is preceded by the word *fa-wak* (future). For example, *fa-wak pehkau* can mean "will stop" or "shall stop" (literally "future to stop"). In Modern Golic, used by most contemporary speakers, this would be *dungi-pehkau* ("will stop", "shall stop").

We have covered a considerable amount of material in this introduction to the Golic Vulcan languages and our work on Vulcan linguistics. Our challenge to you: Pop your copy of [Star Trek: The Motion Picture](#) into a VCR or DVD player and follow along with the sentences (on the example phrases page) as the Vulcan Kolinahr Master, T'Sai, and her subordinate speak them. If you've studied the pronunciation guidelines we've provided, you should have no difficulty in following it. On this site, we will provide you with the tools to learn some basic Golic Vulcan through lessons. This site will expand and change as time goes by.

Some members of our group, your fellow *Star Trek* fans, have spent up to half their lives on this research. We hope you will find it of great use now and in the future. Someday, perhaps, we'll be able to speak it together. Until that day, "Dif-tor heh smusma.." (Live long and prosper!)



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