



Quick & Dirty d20 Linguistics

By

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Introduction

Howdy! Welcome to my little home project; *Quick & Dirty d20 Linguistics*! Presumably you've picked up this file because you're unsatisfied with the oversimplification that the Speak Language skill is in d20. The skill, as it's currently formatted, provides little more than a binary setting; either you know a language or you don't, and if you do, you speak, read and write it fluently. You don't actually make any Speak Language checks, and it only costs one skill rank to purchase this fluency in the language, making it ridiculously easy for anyone other than a fighter with an Intelligence penalty to learn any language they want.

In addition to this, we have the extremely unrealistic convention that pretty much anyone in the entire setting; across continents and even planes of reality, speaks Common. And when you don't speak a language, there are low-level spells (1st level for clerics, bards, wizards, sorcerers, etc.) that allow you to *comprehend languages* easily.

There's actually a very good reason for this extreme simplification, I believe. Most gamers don't care anything about linguistics, and would find the challenge of trying to communicate as they travel to be frustrating and tedious rather than interesting and realistic. The inability to understand another language could potentially cause a game to slow to a crawl or grind to a halt completely. D20, in all of its incarnations, is primarily a game about *action* and getting into the thick of things as soon and as often as possible.

However, it does contain the tools to be a more roleplaying intensive game for those who desire such things as well. The list of skills includes many options that really are only useful for social interaction, or other, less "action-oriented" activities. The Speak Language skill is, unfortunately, one that is a little too brusque for my taste, hence the motivation to write this document and provide

GMs of the various d20 games the ability to expand the use of it and integrate a potentially interesting and flavorful addition to their games.

Despite that, I'm not blind to the advantages that the core system has for treating languages. The catchphrase used throughout the development of these rules is "playable verisimilitude"; I want to add another layer of verisimilitude – the illusion of reality – without making the game needlessly complex, obtuse or esoteric. You certainly don't need to be a linguist to understand these rules; we're not going to get into graphing shared isoglosses between Celestial and Infernal or anything like that. Rather, these rules are designed to happen mainly behind the scenes. The GM of a campaign needs to give a little bit of forethought into the relationship between languages, and then with the exception of a few checks, the rules impact the players only slightly and in ways that are logical and would be expected. The goal is to provide a simple layer of realism that should make the game feel a bit more realistic and offer hopefully interesting challenges without bogging down game play.

Guiding Principles

First of all, these rules are designed to operate within the framework of the SRD rules to being with. There are no new skills, feats or prestige classes here; simply a new application of existing rules, primarily the Speak Language skill. Because of this, it is probably best to start with reproducing the skill as written in the SRD.

Speak Language (None, Trained Only)

Action: Not applicable.

Try Again: Not applicable. There are no Speak Language checks to fail.

The Speak language skill doesn't work like other skills. Languages work as follows.

- You start at 1st level knowing one or two languages (based on your race), plus an additional number of languages equal to your starting Intelligence bonus.
- You can purchase Speak Language just like any other skill, but instead of buying a rank in it, you choose a new language that you can speak.
- You don't make Speak Language checks. You either know a language or you don't.
- A literate character (anyone but a barbarian who has not spent skill points to become literate) can read and write any language she speaks. Each language has an alphabet, though sometimes several spoken languages share a single alphabet.

The guiding principle for the design of these new rules is that the Speak Language skill would be the basis around which the new linguistics feature would hinge, although naturally the GM will need to do some work behind the scenes to make sure that it has a framework in which to work. There is no sample linguistics system presented with this document; the default linguistic system is simply too unrealistic to really even try to make it fit. Rather, for examples, I've provided analogs from the real world that can be used as a guideline for GMs who want to develop a reasonably realistic linguistic system for their own worlds. Note also, that the *Comprehend Languages* spell will negate much of this document, or at least render it obsolete. I recommend eliminating that spell from your campaign.

The Speak Language Skill

The first thing to do is to ground ourselves in the most basic application of the rules for expanded linguistics; acquiring and using the Speak Language skill. Taking a cue from the core rules, the Speak Languages skill

is a class skill for all individuals. The Speak Languages skill is parenthetical; in other words, you must take ranks in each language you learn, marking it as such: Speak Language (Spanish) vs. Speak Language (Russian).

Making a Speak Languages check is also crucial to this system. In general, it is assumed that any starting languages the character has, he speaks with native fluency. Any languages he acquires as the game progresses, he speaks with less than native fluency, although obviously as he gains ranks in the Speak Language skill, he approaches native fluency. The assumption is that a character with five ranks in a given language speaks with near native fluency. He may still be required to make a check at the GM's discretion though. It is suggested that even automatic languages be noted in the skill section with five ranks, especially if the language family option is used (next page.)

A character may take 10 when attempting to read a script in a language for which he has ranks in the appropriate language. He may not take 20, however, unless he has the appropriate tools to translate words and phrases he does not know, such as a good dictionary. A character may never take 10 or 20 when attempting to decipher language he hears.

Making a check is a little bit different than making, say, a Balance check. Normally, you have a DC to hit with your check, and if you are at least equal to that DC you are successful, and if not, you have failed. Speak Languages is not quite so binary in its application; you have degrees of success depending on your result rather than a DC to hit. This system requires a little bit of a judgment call from the GM; there is no hard and fast guide to how much information to impart on a given result. **Table 1** on the next page summarizes these various degrees of success. **Table 2** summarizes various DC modifiers that the GM can implement as

needed, generally to make the check more difficult.

You would still apply your Intelligence modifier to the check as always.

Table 1:

Check Result	Comprehension	Result
5 or less	<10%	You essentially understand none of the speech or text in front of you. You might as well not speak the language at all.
6-10	10-35%	You pick up a few words here and there, but are unable to follow the conversation or text.
11-15	36-65%	You can follow the gist of the speech or text. You are probably missing some details, many of them likely important, but at least you know what its about and more or less what it's saying.
16-20	66-80%	You may miss a word or phrase here and there, but you essentially understand exactly what's being said.
21+	>81%	Even native speakers don't know all the words and phrases they hear. At this range, you understand what you see and hear at a native fluency.

Table 2:

Adjustment to Skill Check	Cause
-2	The speaker is not speaking clearly; is drunk, slurred, has an injured mouth, etc. or otherwise is not articulating clearly. The same penalty could be applied to written documents that are not well written, do not follow conventions of grammar or syntax, etc.
-4	Speech or text heavily uses esoteric language; local vernacular, slang, archaic language or technical jargon being good examples.
+2	Speaker is speaking slowly and enunciating clearly.
+2	Written document is for a lower reading level than normal; children's books are a good example here.
-2 – -4	A range determined by the GM; conditions are not good for comprehension. Speech may be obscured by loud noises, muffled by intervening walls, etc. texts may be faded, stained or otherwise difficult to read.

Language Families

In addition to adding skill levels to your Speak Language skill when learning a new language, there is an additional layer of complexity which adds a great deal of flavor. The concept here is a linguistic one, *mutual intelligibility*, which refers to the ability of a speaker of one language to understand

another. For example, a speaker of Spanish can generally understand a speaker of Portuguese or Italian fairly well without learning the language at all because the languages are so similar to each other. Therefore, in this example, having Speak Language (Spanish) would give you virtual ranks in Speak Language (Portuguese) or Speak Language (Italian).

Using this option creates a little more work for both GM and players; GMs need to come up with relationships between languages in the campaign, and players need to know in when to apply virtual ranks. **Table 3** summarizes the various levels of relation between two languages. To use virtual ranks, you must have ranks in a related language, and the GM must have already defined the relationship between the two languages. The

language you already know is designated *Language X* while the language you are trying to interpret is designated *Language Y*.

In other words, a fluent speaker of Spanish (X, in this example) would speak other languages in a close family relationship (such as Italian, language Y in this example) with X-2 virtual ranks. If he had, therefore, 5 ranks in Speak Language (Spanish), he'd have 3 virtual ranks in Speak Language (Italian).

Table 3:

Relationship	Intelligibility	Virtual Ranks	Example
Dialectical	80-90%	X – 1	Scottish Highlands English vs. Australian English, vs. Eastern Seaboard United States English. This varies from simply regional accents that can be understood with little to no effort to heavily accented dialects that require a few days of acclimatization to understand easily, plus a variety of regional vocabulary and catch phrases.
Close Family	65-80%	X – 2	The various Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, etc.) the various West Slavic languages (Czech, Polish, etc.), West Germanic languages (German, Dutch, etc.) Mutual intelligibility varies; most Spanish speakers have little difficulty understanding Italian, but most English speakers do not say the same for German, for instance. Reading is generally easier, assuming the languages use the same writing system, because words can be picked out that would not sound the same when spoken.
Distant Family	35-65%	X – 4	Iranian languages vs. Indic languages. This is similar to the Close Family relationship, except that the two languages have strayed more from each other, and it is more difficult to understand one from another.
Superfamily	10-35%	X – 6	Indo-European, Sino-Tibetic, Semitic, etc. Language are agreed to be related by comparative linguists, but fairly distantly. Most speakers of one language are unlikely to do more than recognize a few

			similar words here and there.
Unrelated	<10%	None	English vs. Chinese. No relation between these languages.

It is important to note that these relationships are not necessarily genetic; that is, it is not required that languages that share superfamily actually belong to a superfamily, such as Indo-European, as odd as that may sound. Prolonged contact relationships can result in one language borrowing words, and even grammar and syntax structures from a completely unrelated language which would simulate, for our purposes, the same type of relationship. GMs are also advised to use caution with this system. For example, if language X uses a different writing system than its close relative language Y, and a character only has written documents, then he is unable to use any virtual ranks to decipher it unless he also is familiar with that writing system from some other source (say, a language Z that uses the same writing system.)

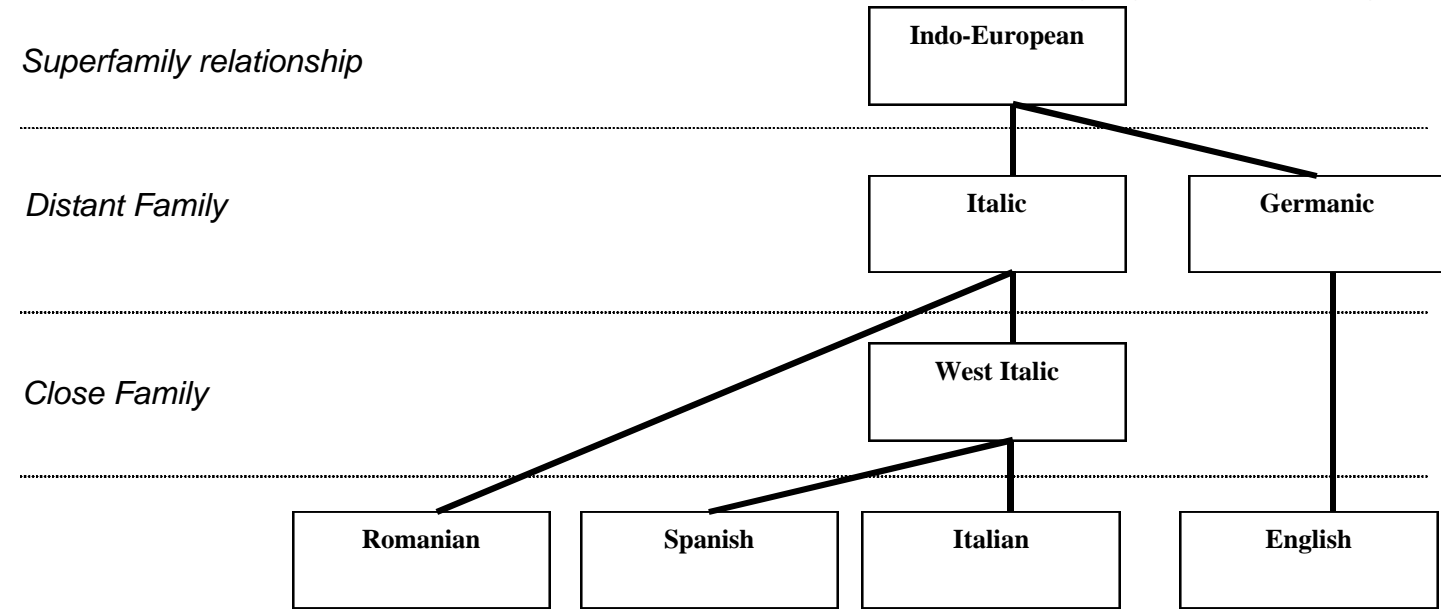
Another key element of using the language families option is that the GM needs to map out his languages in advance, and split them into brackets of relationship with one another. The following diagram shows how this can be done in a simplified example from the real world. All languages on this tree are related; unrelated languages would be placed on another tree. Dialects are also not shown; I

recommend that dialects play a minor role in the campaign unless the two dialects show extreme divergence.

The chart is to be read as follows: all languages for which the closest point of convergence is the top box share only superfamily relationship with each other. For example, English and Spanish are both members of the Indo-European superfamily, but that's about the extent of their relationship. An English speaker with 5 ranks of Speak Language (English) would have -1 virtual rank of Speak Language (Spanish). This is a sensible result for any native English speaker who's listened or looked at Spanish; there are a fair amount of similar words, but not enough that you'd really understand very well unless you got really lucky.

You could, in other words, attempt to make a check to understand what was written or spoken, but you'd be unlikely to get very far beyond catching a few words here and there.

Moving down the chart, you get the next level, the Distant Family. Every language who's closest point of convergence is this level would grant X – 4 virtual ranks of proficiency. The given example is Italic; Romanian and Spanish are two languages that converge at



this level. A character that had 5 ranks of Speak Language (Spanish) would therefore have 1 virtual rank of Speak Language (Romanian) and would have a halfway decent chance of puzzling out anything in Romanian he comes across. However, he's a far cry from proficient, and he's also likely to do little more than pick up a few words or two that make little or no sense. This is a realistic result, based on the my personal experience, for a Spanish speaker attempting to make out Romanian.

The next level down is the Close Family relationship. Any languages that converge at this level apply a virtual ranks or $X - 2$. For the example chart given, that means that a character with 5 ranks Speak Language (Spanish) would have 3 virtual ranks of Speak Language (Italian.)

This system does require a fair bit of forethought from the GM, but it does also lend a fun flavor element to linguistics in your game.

Further Thoughts

The final section is some thoughts of mine on making linguistics be playable and enjoyable. First, two quick notes; you may want to eliminate the spell *Comprehend Languages* if using this document, as it will render most of these rules obsolete, or at least irrelevant. You might also want to consider giving characters a handful of freebie skill points that can only be spent on languages if you're going to be requiring them to use a variety of languages in the campaign.

It is easy for fans of linguistics to get carried away and implement too much detail which is, at best, lost on their players. At worst, it actually detracts significantly from the game. Indeed, it is for precisely this reason that Tolkien did not actually use all of the languages from his famous setting, Middle-earth, instead developing only the Elvish languages, and then *representing* the other languages with familiar earth languages. For example, if you see a Norse name, you know

its Dwarvish. If you see an Old English name, you know it's from Rohan. When you read the book in English, it is supposed to represent Common (Westron). Tolkien, however, never made an pretense that Common was English, or that the Rohirrim actually spoke Old English; in fact, in the appendices, he did indicate a little bit here and there what their actual language looked like.

Why would you want to do this? Clearly, it is a player aid. Your players won't have any context around your fictional languages, which oddly enough, their characters should. Therefore, representing some of those other languages with languages that are familiar helps to serve as a useful shortcut that approximates the character knowledge, but for the players' benefit.

As an example, if you hear the name Vladimir Shostokovich, you probably immediately associate it with Russian. If you hear Hans Brücher, you immediately know it must be German. If you hear José Gonzalez, or Sharif al'Habib, or Takuma Sukiyaki, you similarly know with what cultural group to associate those names. However, if you hear Xepelf Patodist, that may sound suitably exotic, but it will be completely meaningless to your players. If you don't really like having such obviously earthlike names in your setting, you can simply make some minor changes to the names; William can become Willem, Diego can become Deggo, etc.

If you do use unique languages and names, then you probably are best off doing it very seldom, and making the names very easily recognizably similar. It is probably also not useful unless you have enough names tossed around (as in Tolkien's work) that you can gradually *learn* to recognize the cultural context. For example, most readers of *The Lord of the Rings* can recognize an Elvish sounding name anymore because Tolkien used so many of them in his work. For the most part, this is not a practical avenue for

roleplaying games, but only you can be the final judge of that for your game.

A related problem is the proliferation of exotic names. Without the context mentioned above, most names you use in your campaign, if they are from an artificial language, will tend to blur together in your players' minds. It is better to use more familiar names, or names that are at least very distinctive, or to not name very many non-player characters with which the player characters will interact.

However, if you do want to create names that belong to artificial names, there are a few avenues to pursue. There are a number of freeware and shareware programs you can download that actually generate lists of names, and the better ones allow you to create custom language parameters for your names as well. I will not call out any specific programs, but a reasonably simple web search should turn up close to half a dozen you can use. There are a few "manual" methods that I have used successfully in the past as well.

Generating Custom Names

The first method is letter substitution. This method is simple; you take familiar names or words, run them through a formulaic process that spits out a new name. There are three simple steps to this process:

1. Make a small list of which letters you will substitute, and what the replacement letter is.
2. Apply all of those substitutions to your existing name or word.
3. Cleanup anything that looks bad.

Simple, right? Here's an example:

Normal Letter	Replacement Letter
A	I
E	A
H	G
S	R

Normally you'd probably want to have more, but to demonstrate the process, this is good enough. Be sure and pick letters that are common enough that you actually see a noticeable change when you put your names through it. The author's name, and his wife's (maiden) name would thus change as follows:

Joshua Dyal → Jorgui Dyl
Julie Williams → Julia Williimr

See? Not half-bad. The important thing to remember about the results of this method is that you don't want too many letters to be replaced, but you also don't want too few. Too many, and none of your names will come out usable; they'll all be too exotic and difficult to use. Too few, and the names don't show enough change to bother. Also, the results typically need a little bit of cleanup; Dyl is a difficult name to try to pronounce, for example, and what do you do in Williimr with double i's? Changing the names to Jorgui Dyl and Julia Wilimir give you some suitably exotic, yet useable names.

Another alternative, which is more involved but still appealing to role-players, who tend to like charts and rolling dice is to create a matrix of syllables. A simple one would be maybe a 10x10 chart. Decide on how many syllables your name will have (maybe by rolling a d4?) and then generate the syllables in order, by rolling 2d10, one for the horizontal axis and one for the vertical axis. You might also get better results by creating a separate smaller chart for final syllables that you can roll for to end your name. If you want to get extra fancy, you can also have initial syllables on a separate chart as well. The example included here is not really robust enough to use to generate many names, but is big enough to show how the system works, at least:

	1	2	3	4
1	tak	tam	tir	tos
2	sak	sam	sir	sok
3	ta	to	ti	tu
4	ka	la	ku	lu

Again, a very simply matrix for the example, simply a 2d4 chart. I'll make four simply names, rolling a d4 to determine the number of syllables. My results for name one are four syllables, 3,2; 3,4; 2,4; and 3,2, which is the name Sirkulati. Name two is two syllables, 2,1 and 1,1, or Tamtak. Name three is simply one syllable, 1,4 or Ka. Name four is two syllables, 1,1 and 3,4, or Takku.

These can be combined into given names and surnames, or however you want to do them. Obviously a larger table will yield better results, although getting too large becomes a bit more of a chore to create.

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