



CONSIDER THIS

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#46 Language Codes and a "Philosophy of Three-Part Service"

The process of creating, maintaining and studying technical standards, as everyone knows (except those who frequent this site) must be dry as dust, deadly boring, and the very stuff of which tedium is made. Granted, for those versed in the craft, the creation of standards describing complex interoperability interfaces must demand an attention to detail that might capture the interest of those involved. But to others, standards must be totally opaque and meaningless – mere arcane squiggings at best.

How much more deadly then, must be the creation and maintenance of those elementary and arbitrary, albeit utilitarian, codes used to designate items within a single category of data that need shorter and more uniform names, in order to be efficiently processed - time codes, country codes and such? Truly, being one of the bit-stained wretches taxed with responsibility for such binary trivia must be ultimately and terminally *boring*.

Right? Well, perhaps. But perhaps you should defer judgment until you've *Considered This*:

One of the amazing things that Google has brought to the world is the [Google Alert](#) – the modern analog to the traditional fee-based clipping services that would scan newspapers and journals for articles on a given subject on demand. But unlike a clipping service, which used to be quite pricey and delivered its results only in periodic batches, Google Alerts arrive instantaneously and for free. How cool (and distracting) is that?

Not long ago, one of my standing Google Alerts delivered up a press release announcing that a new ISO language code standard had been released. What are language codes? In simplest terms, they are more or less randomly assigned three-letter combinations that can be used as universally recognized surrogates for the names of languages. In that form, they can be easily used as encodings to specify (for example) what language a Web site uses.

Just how many languages are included in the standard? From the [press release](#), I learned that the new version of ISO 639-3 categorizes a grand total of 7,546 languages, up dramatically from the 478 languages included in the previous version.

But the press release hinted at some unanticipated information as well, which piqued my interest, and led me to dig a bit more deeply. The following are some of the things that caught my fancy as I learned more.

First, I found the scope of the effort to be intriguing, as the standard includes [five categories](#) of languages, and not just currently spoken ("living") languages. The others are "historical" (i.e., archaic versions of still-spoken languages, such as Middle English), "extinct" (languages that have passed from usage in the last millennium), and "Ancient" (those that are no longer extant, and that went extinct more than 1,000 years ago). The final category? That's "constructed," which applies to artificial languages that are intended to be used by humans, as compared to computers. Apparently, there have been many more such languages created than just Esperanto (one [Web site](#) states that there are more than 300 such languages (most used only by their creators), including Klingon – a constructed language that ISO has not as yet seen fit to include in ISO 639-3).

Next, browsing through the languages of the world is a fascinating pursuit in its own right. If you love language for language's sake, you will appreciate the richness of the names of the languages themselves. Consider these selections, taken from just those languages that have been given codes beginning with the letter "a".

For example, there are the lyrical African languages *Alumu-Tesu*, *Mandobo Atas*, *Abaga* and *Aka-Bea*. Sadly, reduced to three letter sequences, they become simply *aab*, *aax*, *abg*, and, just as abjectly, *abj*.

But never mind that for now. Instead, enjoy more originals – languages with percussive names, such as these Mezzo-American tongues: *Cubulco Achi* and *Aguacateco*. Or those with more mysterious sounds, such as *Acheron* and *Galo Adi*,

Many are simply fun to roll off the tongue – languages with names like *Obojuitai*, *Akawaio* and *Anakalangu*. Or how about another Amerindian language: *Amahuaca*?

Some names are funky rather than lyrical. Try *Achterhoeks*, *Dzodinka*, *Pudtol Atta*, and my personal favorite, which is *Akhvakh*, which seems to call for a !Kung people-style, introductory exclamation mark to be fully appreciated. Or perhaps you can't help thinking of those insurance commercials with the duck (*AFLAC!*).

Other languages provide multicultural history lessons, such as *Saint Lucian Creole French*, or *Judeo-Tunisian Arabic* (what's the deal with that one?) or offer ethno-geographic snapshots, like *Mescalero-Chiricahua Apache*.

Some language names present puzzles – where exactly does *Alabama* come from if not...? And who is that speaks *War* on an everyday basis? Others are simply unfortunate, at least to an English speaker: *Bozoum* is not too bad, but how about *Anal* and *Anus*? In this case, the three letter code combinations *anm* and *auq*, respectively, are Occidental improvements.

Some language names can't fail to raise a smile of a different sort, particularly when grouped together, such as *Mia Brat*, *Omie*, *Abom*, and ultimately, *Amuzgo*, so *Solong*.

And if *Molmo One* were a jet, would it be an *Awak*?

Or perhaps you enjoy parlor games. In that case, say this one five times quickly: *Adynyamathanha*.

The one of a kind prize in the A series, however, must unquestionably go to *=/Kx'aul/'ein*. If you're curious where that one is spoken, as I was, you can [Google it](#) and find out (it's often spoken, but presumably seldom spelled, in Namibia).

All of which makes for good fun. But as a matter of fact, there's also a more serious back story. ISO 639-3, you see, is not maintained by a typical standards organization. Instead, the Registrar appointed by ISO to be its custodian is called SIL International, an organization with a mission that is as interesting as its history.

SIL, you see, derives from the organization's original name, which was the *Summer Institute of Linguistics*, an organization founded by [William Cameron Townsend](#) (1896 – 1982), who departed for Guatemala in 1919, accompanied by crates filled with the Bible in Spanish to distribute to the indigenous peoples of Central America. When he arrived, however, he found to his chagrin that the native Guatemalans did not in fact speak Spanish. But in that realization, he found his life-long calling as well.

Instead of completing his original plan, Townsend moved up country, settling in with the Mayan Cakchiquel. There, he learned to speak their [language](#), developed an alphabet to record it, and with the help of assistants, translated the New Testament into Cakchiquel.

Moreover, unlike the stereotypical Ugly American, he began to develop a personal "Philosophy of Three Part Service," summarized at the SIL International Website as follows:

Townsend...insisted that members of SIL should be ready to serve others scientifically, materially, and spiritually. From early in his career Townsend was personally committed to each of these three areas of involvement. It is not sufficient, he argued, that a person should be interested in serving people unless he has that scientific preparation which will make his contribution relevant and effective. Service based on a foundation of scientific investigation, he held, is more likely to have a permanent impact than service motivated by high ideals but without a thorough understanding of the people being served.

Of special importance, he maintained, is a careful study of a people's language and, by means of that language, an acquired insight into their aspirations and goals. But a scientific study in which the investigator is interested merely in amassing data about the people studied and not in helping them reach worthy goals may have some value to the scientific world, but it will have ignored human values. Townsend affirmed that scientific knowledge should be used as a means for offering developing people the *resource of choice* for bettering their daily lives. Additionally, he taught that unless a minority people can adjust to their place in the changing world and, with economic assistance, learn something of the acquired wisdom of humankind, these people may sink into apathy or despair.

Crucial to a well-rounded program for minority-language groups, Townsend believed, is the spiritual component. Natural religion, defined as man's seeking for an integrating explanation of his life and world, indicates that all people have deep, unfulfilled spiritual needs. An adequate effort to serve minority-language communities, he believed, must take cognizance of this spiritual dimension. It may not be convenient for some individuals or for a government to be involved in such matters, but for a private organization it is appropriate. It can devote itself to the tasks of scientific investigation and at the same time to practical service and to spiritual orientation. This three-phased objective molded Townsend's career.

Townsend founded a number of affiliated non-profits to further his service ideals, one of which was SIL International. A quarter-century after Townsend's death, that organization describes itself as follows:

Founded over 70 years ago, SIL International is a faith-based organization that studies, documents, and assists in developing the world's lesser-known languages. SIL's staff shares a Christian commitment to service, academic excellence, and professional engagement through literacy, linguistics, translation, and other academic disciplines. SIL makes its services available to all without regard to religious belief, political ideology, gender, race, or ethnic background.

SIL...has grown from a small summer linguistics training program with two students in 1934 to a staff of over 5,000 coming from over 60 countries. SIL's linguistic investigation exceeds 1,800 languages spoken by over 1.2 billion people in more than 70 countries.

If you read further at the [SIL Web site](#), you'll learn that it has been granted formal consultative status by UNESCO, and that it focuses on unwritten languages, because, "[p]eople who speak these languages often live in geographic, social, and economic isolation. Studying these languages results in practical help for local people and contributes to the broader knowledge of [linguistics](#), [anthropology](#), and [ethnomusicology](#)." You'll also see that SIL researches and develops software and speech analysis tools," among many other activities, and that, "most SIL workers develop individual funding resources for particular projects and personal support."

Of course, it is also the [Registration Authority](#) for ISO 639-3, which is based in large part on its own [Ethnologue](#) (15th edition), subtitled *An encyclopedic reference work cataloging all of the world's 6,912 known living languages*.

All of which goes to show that creating and maintaining even something as mundane as a three letter language code standard may not be quite as boring an enterprise as it might at

first seem to be. And, perhaps also, that even in the case of standards, the Lord does indeed work in mysterious ways.

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