Multi-Clong

Earlier today, over on the conlang subreddit, /u/SapphoenixFireBird made a post outlining a multi-conlang game the subreddit could put together: various language creators would translate small parts of a song and, at the end, they would sing the final product. It remains to be seen if it will pan out, but I figured I'd write a tiny little post about the translation of my couple sentences.[1]

I chose to do my lines in Classical Valkon, a constructed language influenced phonologically by the Semitic and Berber languages.[2] Grammatically, it draws from Coptic and Navajo, among others; one of my stated goals was to design a language which made pervasive use of asyndeton, nominal TAM, and a symmetrical voice system akin to many of the Austronesian languages (Tagalog in particular). In addition, the language features a complex noun class / gender system with fifteen different classes and a set of classificatory prefixes that appear on verbs which must agree with the subject's class while also encoding associated motion. Realistically though, I probably won't be able to show off too much of this in my two sentences:

> *Can I ever make a change? Will my heart begin to mend?*

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[1] Next time, I put forward that we should do a cover of "Multi-Love" by Unknown Mortal Orchestra, only because of the possible puns.

[2] In addition to these influences, Modern Greek played a not insignificant role in its design because I can't help but include parts of what I consider to be one of the most phonaesthetic languages out there.

Classical Valkon is an SVO language that also features a healthy amount of VSO from time to time—most importantly for us, VSO appears in polar questions.[3] In this way, Classical Valkon mirrors English. We could, for effect, play with our voice system, perhaps treating the "change" to be "made" as the subject via patient voice, though we should first determine how Classical Valkon would translate the ideas being conveyed.

Can I ever make a change?

This is honestly a bit of a weird phrase. English-speakers use "make" so flexibly that it hardly carries any semantic meaning. We should rephrase this: "can I ever change anything?" or "can I ever change a thing?" I'm partial to the latter phrasing because it seems to capture the intended meaning better. Of course, we trade one problem for another: how do we translate "thing." A whole lot of meanings fall under the domain of "thing"—objects, concepts, symbols, events, etc—so while it is tempting to just come up with some Valkon word that also means "thing," I want to look at other languages to see how they handle things.[4]

Farsi has چیز which gave Punjabi ਚੀਜ਼—these seem to be limited to physical objects and tangible things. Ancient Greek had πρᾶγμα which gave Coptic ⲡⲣⲁⲅⲙⲁ—these can indicate both physical things and abstract occurrences and events.

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[3] Polar questions are questions with yes-no answers, as opposed to non-polar questions (or wh-questions) that require more information to be answered.
[4] Sorry for the pun.

I'm not fluent in Japanese, but I have studied it a bit, so it is my understanding that if one wanted to translate "thing" into the language, you'd end up with either 事 (koto) or 物 (mono). The former (among other meanings) describes an event, a business affair, or an incident, though it can also be used for circumstances or situations. On the other hand, 物 seems to describe a tangible thing: an object, a belonging, or a quality (though it also has other, less physical meanings).

In exploring these words, it has occurred to me that Classical Valkon has the perfect vessel for dividing up the semantic domain of "thing" into various subsections: its class system. For example, the language has a class for miscellaneous inanimate objects, but it also has another for long slender inflexible objects (akin to Zulu's noun class for long, thin objects). While we could have a word for "thing" that fits all tangible, inanimate objects, we could also have another word for "things" that are long and inflexible (as well as the other classes).

This still kicks the can a bit: now we have to decide what class the "thing" from our given line is referring to. I think it is fairly obvious that it is not referring to long, flexible objects or edible foods; we can check most of our classes off on similar grounds. The contenders are as follows: dangerous objects and phenomena, general inanimate objects, and abstract concepts (which includes events).

An argument in favor of classing our "thing" as a dangerous object or phenomena is that it would fit with the general tone of the song. It, uh, isn't

exactly uplifting. I'm not exactly familiar with the project it is associated with, but suffice to say the impression it is giving me is, let's say, *interesting*. Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised; conlanging isn't the sort of hobby that attracts the entirely "normal" (and I say this as one of them).

I've effectively persuaded myself that we should go with the dangerous phenomena, if only because I find it slightly humorous to do so. We already have two morphemes that we can combine and evolve to come up with our word: Ancient Valkon featured the prefix /ka-/ which indicated that something was dangerous and the bound morpheme /-tja/ which was added to other morphemes to indicate a related "thing." Thus, we can combine these to get the Ancient Valkon word /katja/, or "dangerous thing." If we evolve this through the sound changes between Ancient and Classical Valkon, we get:

$$/kəʔatja/ \rightarrow /k'atʲa/ \rightarrow /k'a\widehat{ts}/ \rightarrow /qas/ \ [qɑs] \ ⟨qás⟩$$

Okay, so we have one word of our translation done. No, I'm kidding, the rest of this really shouldn't be that hard since it is largely composed of vocabulary and grammatical structures I've already designed. If we look back at our first line:

Can I ever make a change?

We might gloss this in Valkon as:

In case you either aren't familiar with these abbreviations or are uncertain how some of them are being used, they should be read like so:

INT	—	interrogative particle
ɪv	—	fourth-class agreement prefix
PV	—	patient voice
ABS	—	absolute state
DIR	—	direct case
1SG	—	first-person pronoun
IND	—	indirect case

If we naively filled in this translation, we would get:

Vá qekhí vāthá 'áḷḷ qásen áfsa.

vá	qe-khí	vāthá	'áḷḷ	qás-en	áf-sa
INT	ɪv-can\PV	change	ever	thing\ABS-DIR	1SG-IND

We should consider the rhythm of the line.

Can	*I*	*ever*	*make*	*a*	*change?*
—	˘	—˘	—	˘	—

If I'm not mistaken, the song uses this sort of structure throughout: three pairs of syllables, heavy-light, with one final heavy syllable at the end of each line. Looking at our second line:

Will	*my*	*heart*	*begin*	*to*	*mend?*
—	˘	—	˘—	˘	—

We should really consider trying to adhere to this structure. Obviously, our current form is far too long, so we should consider losing the interrogative particle (which is optional, given the word order). In addition, Classical Valkon has polypersonal agreement, so we can drop the first-person pronoun and place a object agreement marker on the verb, giving us:

Qekhíf vāthá 'áḷ qásen.

[qɛ.'χɪf væː.'θæ ʕɑʐˤ 'qɑ.sɛn]

qe-khí-f	vāthá	'áḷ	qás-en
ɪv-can\PV-1SG	change	ever	thing-DIR

We have the right number of syllables now, but their stress pattern is a bit off. Admittedly, there isn't too much we can do to remedy this, and it works well enough that I think we should move on to the second line. The best we can do is to make this one match as closely as possible with our first line.

Will my heart begin to mend?

Learning from our last translation, we'll move the verb to the front and go without an interrogative particle, giving us a structure like so:

III.TRANSL-mend\PV heart\CON-1SG

A heart is a member of the third class of nouns, so the verb will require an agreement prefix. Since the verb is non-volitional and intransitive, we can use the patient voice as well. We're going to wield Classical Valkon's encoding of associated motion to convey the "begin" aspect of the line. In Classical Valkon, the translocative form is often used to convey an inchoative aspect, as we have here.

Ṣṭekhṭēlén qākhruváyem.

[sˤtˤɛχ.tˤɛː.'lɛn qɑː.χ.rʊ.'vɑ.jɛm]

ṣṭekh-ṭēlén   qākhruv-á-yem

III.TRANSL-mend\PV   heart\CON-1SG-POST

For maximum angst, I've thrown in an added post-stative marker on "my heart" which in this case might be translated to "what once was my heart." Together, our lines are:

Qekhíf vāthá 'áḷ qásen.

Ṣṭekhṭēlén qākhruváyem.

Ideally, they would be pronounced like so:

[qɛ.ˈχɪf væː.ˈθæ ʕaʐˤ ˈqɑ.sɛn]

[sˤtˤɛχ.tˤɛː.ˈlɛn qɑːχ.rʊ.ˈvɑ.jɛm]

However, I know that vowel length and stress may need to be altered to fit with the song, so it may look more like this:

[qɛχɪf væθæ ʕaʐˤ qɑsɛn]

[sˤtˤɛχtˤɛlɛn qɑχrʊvɑjɛm]

And since uvulars and pharyngeals can be difficult:

[kɛxɪf væθæ ʔɑl kɑsɛn]

[stɛxtɛlɛn kɑxrʊvɑjɛm]

This about does it for this little post. It ended up being longer than I intended, mostly because I felt I had to justify certain choices along the way, but hopefully it has provided at least some insight into the way that the language works and its most interesting features. Thank you for reading.