CASE STUDY: MUNJA'KIN NEGATION

I didn't read a lot of age-appropriate stuff when I was a preteen, but one set of books I absolutely fell in love with were the Oz books. I read all the original 14 written by L. Frank Baum and also one of the later Oz books by a different author, but I preferred the originals. I found it refreshing to read a fantasy series that didn't rely heavily on European tropes, but instead seemed uniquely American (specifically 19th century American). They don't all still hold up, I'm sure, but at the time I devoured them.

Needless to say, when I was contacted about creating languages for a show based on the Oz books I was over the moon. *Finally* they were going to get a proper treatment! (I'm not a fan of the singing/dancing version.) Then I heard it was going to be a modernized, "dark" version of Oz, and I was like, eh…okay…

Then it was canceled.

But then it came back! David Schulner, creator of the NBC phenomenon *New Amsterdam* (#Sharpwin), was going to be the new show runner, and *every single episode* was going to be directed by Tarsem Singh! *The* Tarsem Singh—the one who did *The Fall*! All ten episodes! It was called *Emerald City*, we did ten amazing episodes…

…and then it was canceled again.

The moral of the story is this: If you want an Oz adaptation that is faithful to the books and done in the style of Georges Méliès (or, shooting my shot, *Little Nemo* or *The Nutcracker*—or anything else by Hoffmann, like *The Golden Pot* or *The Mines of Falun*), come talk to me.

Languagewise, I did two languages for *Emerald City*: Inha, a magically-inherited language for the various witches, and Munja'kin, a naturalistic language for the Munja'kin people (the show's analog of the Munchkins). Perhaps inspired by the glottal stop in the name Munja'kin, which I inherited, I decided to make this language a kind of redo of Kamakawi. Kamakawi is a language you've seen in this book a bit, but truth be told, it's not up to my present standards. There are a number of things I tried to do with that language that simply don't pass muster, and so with Munja'kin, I hoped to do some of the same things the right way.

Munja'kin is a VSO language that is *minimally* inflectional (one inflection on verbs, and one on pronouns, but that's about it), with modifiers following what they modify, relative clauses following nouns, and possessors following possessees. Its phonology is minimal, but it has some *wild* sound changes that make forms a bit unpredictable. Let me tell you: If you want to make things weird, have a proto *e and have it go to [ə] when unstressed and [i] when stressed—then have [ə] merge with [a]. It's bananas.

When I came to negation, I wanted to do something I hadn't done before. As I researched lexical sources for negation, I saw that words like "leave" or "abandon" or "drop" can become predicate negators. This gave me an idea.

In Munja'kin, there is a strategy for separating direct objects from subjects, but it's only used if the subject is next to the direct object. Here's an example of this:

*Lon tun **pa juru**.* [ˈlon tun **pa** ˈ**dʒu.ɾu**] "I see **a rock**."

Above, the function of *pa* is simply to indicate that *juru* "rock" is the direct object. Below, though, when an auxiliary is used, it's not needed:

*Ambro tun lon **juru**.* [ˈam.bɾo tun ˈlon ˈ**dʒu.ɾu**] “I can see **a rock**.”

Above *pa* is both unnecessary and ungrammatical. Instead the order of the two nouns and the verb separating the two makes clear who does what to whom.

For negation, I decided to use a transitive verb *inju* “abandon”, as I thought that would be easiest. An older phrase using the word might have looked like this:

Inju tun pa juru. [ˈin.dʒu tun pa ˈdʒu.ɾu] “I abandon the rock.”

Grammaticalizing *inju* wouldn’t be much of a trick, since the lone inflection for verbs is a nominalization strategy. By simply taking a verb, like *lon* “see”, and nominalizing it, in this case turning it into the noun *londri*, you get…

Inju tun pa londri. [ˈin.dʒu tun pa ˈlon.dɾi] “I do not see.”

Ta da! Of course, if the verb takes an object, it will require a double object construction, since the nominalized verb is *technically* the object of *inju*. And you can do that, as shown below:

Inju tun pa londri juru. [ˈin.dʒu tun pa ˈlon.dɾi ˈdʒu.ɾu] “I do not see a rock.”

But analogizing from the auxiliary construction shown above, I added this as another negation strategy:

Inju tun lon juru. [ˈin.dʒu tun ˈlon ˈdʒu.ɾu] “I do not see a rock.”

And thus a true negative auxiliary was born.