

Tamarian Grammar

Analysis by Christopher L. Bennett

Based on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: “Darmok” (Teleplay by Joe Menosky, Story by Philip LaZebnik and Joe Menosky)

Tamarian is made up of statements of images and impressions, “snapshots” of events and general descriptions of state, rather than processes.

Rai and Jiri at Lungha. Rai of Lowani. Lowani under two moons. Jiri of Ubaya. Ubaya of crossed roads. At Lungha. Lungha. Her sky grey.

First, the basic sentence asserting the topic. This is followed by modifiers of each of the nouns, in separate sentences rather than embedded within it. (Embedding would be “Rai of Lowani at Lungha,” putting one phrase inside another.) The modifier is itself modified in the same way, recursively. This process is completed for each noun before moving to the next noun in the basic sentence, and then the next. First all three nouns are stated, then each is modified in turn. Each person is modified with a place of origin, and each place (including the location of the core sentence) is modified with a poetic description.

Rai	and	Jiri	-----	
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of Lowani		of Ubaya		at Lungha
under two moons		of crossed roads		her sky grey

Note the branching structure of the written language. It may correspond to this kind of diagram.

Thus, the written language is more efficient than the spoken. But in a language driven by poetry and the conveying of impressions, efficiency may not be the desired goal.

This is the longhand version for telling the basic story. When speaking among themselves, they use shorthand: “Kadir beneath Mo Moteh,” etc.

In this case, a single subject is specified, followed by a preposition and a place.

Sometimes the subject and modifier appear to be separated:

Shaka. When the walls fell.
Temba. His arms wide.

While this could be an informal usage or a shift in emphasis, it could represent a similar lack of embedding to the above. The only things that seem to be integrated into the same sentence as the noun are prepositional phrases: “at Lungha,” “under two moons,” “of crossed roads” (i.e. “at the crossroads”). The same pattern here is seen in “Lungha. Her sky grey.” When the modifier is not prepositional, it seems to remain separate. This is particularly true when the modifying phrase is a possessive. There is no provision for “Lungha’s sky” or “Temba’s arms.” First the

subject is identified, followed by a separate possessive. This is because each is a separate noun, a separate image. First Lungha is specified, then its sky -- each a separate image the listener must picture.

(Compare: *Temba at rest*. This is a single sentence because it contains only one noun and one modifier.)

Except we later get this statement:

Kiazi's children. Their faces wet.

For once we get a possessive proper noun: "Kiazi's children" rather than "Kiazi. His/her children." Is this an example of an irregular construction? Do names ending in "zi" allow this kind of inflection while other nouns don't? Or perhaps it is the reference to children that allows it -- are children seen as more intimately linked to the referenced person than even Temba's arms? Alternatively, Dathon could simply be picking up on Picard's use of the possessive suffix. (Note that the English "Picard's use" is a contraction of "Picard his use.") Or it could be a borrowed phrase from the non-Tamarian myth the story comes from (just as "Darmok and Jalad" is a myth from Shantil III).

Note on "Shaka": "When the walls fell" is the only Tamarian sentence that seems to have a verb in it. This is probably a paraphrase; a more proper Tamarian construction might be "At the fallen walls." Or given the rule above, perhaps it should be "His/her/its walls falling."

Note on "Under two moons": If Lowani and Ubya are on the same planet, would they not both be under two moons at various times? This phrase may not be a general description of Lowani, but an allusion to a particular epic for which Lowani is famous, one that took place when the two moons were together in its sky.

Zima at Anzo. Zima and Bakor.

In this statement, the normal sentence structure is broken up into two more fundamental units. This same sentence spoken formally would be "Zima and Bakor at Anzo." Perhaps the first officer was speaking in a fragmentary way in his haste.

Here's an unusual structure:

Chenza at court. The court of silence.

The lack of embedding is consistent -- the description remains separate and restates the noun. What's unusual is the use of an abstract noun, "silence." But "of silence" could be a translation of an adjective meaning "silent."

Another unusual construction:

The river Temarc. In winter.

This is the one case where a proper noun is modified by another noun. Perhaps there is more than one Temarc so it is necessary to specify which. This is the only case of two nouns in a single sentence (assuming we treat “of silence” as an adjective above), though one is proper and one is not. The isolated prepositional phrase, “in winter,” is also unusual. A more standard construction might be “The river Temarc. Temarc in winter.” Perhaps the irregular usage of the noun modifier in the first sentence forces the irregular omission of a noun in the second.

Uzani. His army at Lashmir.

This still follows the rules seen above. The basic phrase is: “Uzani. His army.” But nouns can be modified by prepositional phrases in the same sentence: “His army at Lashmir.” However:

His army. With fist open.
His army. With fist closed.

Again, when the modifier is not prepositional, particularly if it includes a separate noun, it goes in a separate sentence.

Kailash... When it rises...

The use of ellipses in the script makes it hard to be certain, but these seem to be two sentences. As with “Shaka,” statements of “when” also go in separate sentences. Unlike “Shaka,” it is not a separate noun doing the rising, but Kailash itself (a river, perhaps). This clarifies that it is the use of time/process indicators such as “when” that require a separate sentence.

The “full” narrative of the Darmok myth, reconstructed from Dathon’s statements:

Darmok of Kanza. Jalad of the Kituay.
Darmok on the ocean. Tanagra on the ocean. Darmok at Tanagra.
Jalad on the ocean. Jalad at Tanagra.
The beast at Tanagra.
Darmok and Jalad on the ocean.

This must be a shorthand, leaving out a wealth of detail. Dathon is badly injured, and senses that Picard gets the gist, so he probably doesn’t give all the gory specifics.

We see the same basic sentence structures here, combined in new ways. We don’t get “Darmok and Tanagra on the ocean,” which is grammatically allowable, because the idea is to indicate them separately. Also because Tanagra is a place, not a person.

We also see transitions of state occurring: “Darmok on the ocean” changes to “Darmok at Tanagra,” and the same with Jalad. Here, successive sentences with the same primary noun and two different prepositional modifiers represent the process of changing location. There is no provision for “Darmok went from the ocean to Tanagra,” only “Darmok on the ocean. Darmok

at Tanagra.” Concepts of time and change are communicated by the relation of consecutive sentences to one another.

The same method might be used to express concepts conveyed through verbs in English. How would a Tamarian captain tell his engineer “Fix that broken framizam?” By something analogous to “The framizam in pieces. The framizam restored.” Alternatively, actions could be described by analogy. “Turn ninety degrees” could be represented by “The valley at dawn. The valley at midday.”

However, the “standard mathematical progression” used by the Tamarians to signal the Federation proves that they do have a number system. “Turn seventy degrees” could perhaps be conveyed by “The wheel. Seventy.”

Kira at Bashi.

Dathon uses this phrase to ask Picard to tell him a story, and then uses “Temba. His arms wide” as a synonym. So the same concept can be expressed by more than one allusion, though there are no doubt differences in nuance. Perhaps “Kira at Bashi” more literally means “Tell me a story” rather than simply “Give.”

Note that “Temba” is used both to mean “I give you” and “you give me.” The further grammatical information is given nonverbally, through gesture, tone, and context. Given the sparseness and repetition of Tamarian vocabulary, a considerable amount of syntactical information must be conveyed by these means. This is analogous to tonal languages such as Mandarin, where the way a single syllable is intoned can change its entire meaning. In this case, the core meaning is probably the same, but the intonation and body language convey all possible variants. “Temba” could be the root word of concepts ranging from “give” to “generous” to “teach” to “transmit” to “infect with a disease,” and so on.

There are a couple of instances of the same statement being phrased differently:

Sokath! His eyes uncovered! or *Sokath! His eyes open!*
Mirab. His sails unfurled. or *Mirab. With sails unfurled.*

Both variant forms are used only by the First Officer, although he uses the standard form of “Mirab” when speaking with Dathon. Perhaps the variants represent his distinct dialect, and while he is with Dathon he sticks to the more standard forms -- in the same way that a person who speaks a “street” dialect at home and with friends may try to avoid it and use more “proper” diction while at work with others who speak that way. However, both “His sails unfurled” and “With sails unfurled” have precedent for their structure in other phrases, so these could simply be allowable variants within a single dialect, representing variation between individual speech patterns.

Data and Troi on the Tamarians:

Data: "The Tamarian ego structure does not seem to allow what we normally think of as self-identity. Their ability to abstract is highly unusual. They seem to communicate through narrative imagery -- by reference to the individuals and places which appear in their mytho-historical accounts."

Troi: "Image is everything to the Tamarians. It embodies their emotional states, their very thought processes. It's how they communicate, and how they think."

This confirms that descriptions of images -- moments, scenes, snapshots of events -- are the building blocks of Tamarian. This suggests a lack of time sense as we understand it -- reality is perceived as moments rather than processes. This relates to their lack of self-identity, their identification with mythic figures. They don't distinguish between past and present; the mythic past *is* the reality they inhabit. (Could this explain the "Kiazi's children" mystery above? The child is not distinguished from the parent?)

How does the computer know that Darmok and Tanagra are a mythic hunter and island on Shantil III, and yet not know the mythical context of this or the other Tamarian referents? Shantil III must be a world in the Tamarian sphere of influence that has been visited by another culture that in turn has had some contact with the Federation and shared some of the contents of its databanks, but not all. The Starfleet database could contain the text of a book that references these locations in its notes but refers the reader to another book not included in the cultural exchange with the Federation.

Tamarian is an example of a *noncompositional* language, in that the meanings of expressions are not contained within the constituent parts of those expressions. Many phrases in human languages are noncompositional, such as idioms ("He hit the roof") and allusions ("He's quite the Romeo"). Many Chinese four-character idioms are more-or-less obscure references to ancient history and literature ("Break the woks, sink the boats"), requiring familiarity with the cultural context to understand.

The written language is used to communicate more technical information of sorts that the spoken language is ill-suited for. There is real precedent, such as the use of musical or mathematical notation to convey things that don't have words for them per se. Also, given the Tamarians' reliance on physical as well as conceptual symbols (the decorations pinned to their uniforms and used in their rituals), it makes sense that they would be innately predisposed to incorporate written symbols into their overall "performance" of communication.

Vocabulary

Callimas at Bahar. -- Spoken after Dathon's outburst of pain, reassuring Picard. Could be "I'm okay," "I apologize," or "Don't worry."

Chenza at court. The court of silence. -- Spoken by First Officer to silence Riker. "Be quiet" or "I'm not listening."

Kadir beneath Mo Moteh. -- Spoken by First Officer and Dathon after Picard speaks in "incomprehensible" English rather than their speech. The Tamarian crew laughs when the FO says it. Could refer to someone speaking gibberish or being slow to catch on. Kadir may have been a comical figure, or perhaps a town like Gotham, legendary for its fools. (Mo Moteh could have been a volcano spewing gases that deranged the people of Kadir.)

Kailash. When it rises. -- Spoken by FO to tactical officer just before they cut off communications. Could be an order to sever comms; perhaps Kailash is a river that cuts off a passageway or engulfs a bridge when it rises. (Raphael Carter's *Darmok Dictionary* interprets it as a reply to Riker's warning about the danger to Dathon, stating that it is a necessary risk. However, this assumes that the FO understands Riker's words, which is not consistent with the script.)

Kiazi's children. Their faces wet. -- Spoken by Dathon after spasm of pain. Perhaps "It's too late, there's nothing more you can do." The children are probably weeping over the dying or already-dead Kiazi. Dathon is saying Picard can do nothing but be with him and pay respects before he dies.

Kira at Bashi. -- Request from Dathon for Picard to reciprocate his storytelling. "Tell me a story" or "Give something in exchange for what I have given."

Kiteo. His eyes closed. -- Spoken by FO to his crew, after Riker's intimidating bluster. Perhaps "Pay no attention," "Don't be provoked." (Carter interprets it as "break off communications," but it does not precede that action; "Kailash" is a better fit to that concept.)

Mirab. His (With) sails unfurled. -- "Let's leave here."

Shaka. When the walls fell. -- Failure.

Sokath. His eyes uncovered (open). -- Spoken triumphantly by Dathon and FO when Picard finally catches on. "By George, I think he's got it!" Perhaps Sokath was blinded for a long time and finally gained sight.

[The river] Temarc. In winter. -- "Be still" or "Be silent." Literally "Freeze."

Temba. His arms wide. -- "Give."

Zinda. His face black. His eyes red. -- Spoken at moments of great anger or pain -- when Dathon is in agony and warning Picard off, and when the FO is furious at seeing Dathon's dagger in Picard's hand. "His face black" suggests the Tamarian face flushes dark when angry or stressed, or it could refer to a non-Tamarian species. Or perhaps Zinda is soot-blackened from a fire, his eyes irritated. Perhaps the fire has burned down his home and family, he's just barely gotten out, and he's hurting and furious.