Simlish: The language of The Sims

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Abstract

Perhaps the most famous fictional language in video games, Simlish[1] is an essential part of the success of The Sims and certainly a huge reason why so many players fell in love with the games. In this article, we will explore its origins, try to examine the language from a linguistic point of view, discuss some of the interesting aspects it has and compare it to other fictional languages.

Introduction to The Sims

Simlish is an artificial language created for the video game series The Sims. For those who have never heard of it, The Sims is a series of life simulation games where players control virtual people called "sims" and live their lives "just like in the real world". The gameplay is very open-ended as there is no specific goal to achieve. Players can choose what they want to do with their sims — have big families, build relationships, pursue careers, fulfill sims's desires, build houses, create stories and way more — the possibilities are endless.

After the great success of the first game released in 2000, three more sequels were released, dozens of expansion packs, and a number of spin-offs. The Sims 4 is the latest installment in the series, and it is still being updated with new content and expansions up to this date. Overall, with around 200 million copies sold worldwide, there is no doubt that The Sims is one of the most successful video game series of all time.

How Simlish was created

Will Wright, a game designer and the creator of The Sims[2], wanted to avoid using a real language because he thought that the small number of voice lines sims would say would become repetitive very quickly. Also, there would be a need for translations into other languages, which would add additional costs. Instead, he wanted to have a language that anyone could "understand" and resonate with sims's emotions, regardless of their native language. Something that would fit the distinctive style of the game while still leaving the exact meaning of what was said open to the player's imagination.

Initially, Wright and his team considered using musical instruments, but this idea was quickly scrapped as it did not really convey the human side of the sims. Then, they experimented with mixing real languages like Ukrainian, Navajo, Tagalog and Estonian into one mishmash kind of language. But this also did not work well because the voice actors had problems making it sound fluent and natural (Adams, 2011; Barnes, 2020).

After numerous unsuccessful attempts and some frustration, one of the voice actors suggested trying an improvisation game called "foreign poet", where the actor tells a poem in impassioned gibberish and the listener has to interpret it in English. Surprisingly, this gibberish seemed to be exactly what Wright was looking for and that is how the first bits of Simlish were born[3] (Kilbane, 2020).

Phonetics and Phonology

Phonetically, Simlish sounds a lot like American English. It contains some recognizable American English sounds like the r-colored vowel /ɚ/, which can be heard in the words like *bird* [ˈbɚːd] and *water* [ˈwɑːɾɚ]. This so-called rhotic vowel is extremely rare among the world's languages, but it appears in Simlish in the words like *blursh* [ˈblɚːʃ] – 'excuse me' or *litzergam* [ˈlɪtzɚgæm] – 'thank you' (Kirce, 2024).

The strong influence of American English is not surprising because the voice actors creating the lan-

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[2] "The Sims" is the name of both the first game and the entire series.

[3] The very first bits of Simlish were created for Wright's game SimCopter (1996), but its use skyrocketed into fame with The Sims (Bracchi, 2023).

guage are Americans. Even though they speak gibberish, they are still using the sounds of their native language because those are the sounds that they are the most familiar with. It is worth noting that the Simlish in the first game sounds less "English-like" than the Simlish in the later games. This is an artificial example of the influence that language contact can have on sound shifts over time. Therefore, the Simlish phonology has taken on more features of English as a result of extended contact with the English-speaking world (EJM, 2020).

Although the influence of American English is obvious, there are some differences between the two. For example, Simlish does not have dental phonemes, particularly /θ/ and /ð/ (sounds at the beginning of words *think* and *the* respectively), which are very common in many dialects of English. Another difference is consonant clusters. English allows up to three consonants at the beginning of a word (e.g., *strong*) and four or five consonants at the end of a word (e.g., *sixths* or *angsts*). Simlish allows a maximum of two consonants. However, these consonants may be used in unorthodox ways in comparison to English (e.g., *bwu* for 'blue') (EJM, 2020).

Many English speakers compare Simlish to babbling or baby talk. After examining the phonology, this does make sense. Simlish allows a lot of consonant + /w/ clusters that are typical for children's early attempts to say words containing a consonant + /l/ or consonant + /r/, and do not exist in adult English (EJM, 2020).

Writing system

In The Sims 1[4], any kind of text is usually avoided in favor of pictograms or dingbats. For example, the stop sign in The Sims is a red octagon with a flat, white hand (Atwood, 2007). But by The Sims 2, we see a Simlish-specific writing system appear on signs and television (Kirce, 2024). However, there is no official Simlish alphabet or set of glyphs used. Throughout the series, multiple different custom fonts have been used to represent texts in Simlish, making it unreadable. I assume that this further supports the freedom of interpretation that Simlish offers.

As Simlish appears more and more in the newer games, some interesting variations have emerged. In The Sims 2: University, we can see Simlish variations of Greek letters. But a particularly interesting variation was introduced with The Sims 4: Snowy Escape and is called "Simji". It mixes and morphs Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji, the three writing systems used in Japanese orthography, into a sort of "Japanese version of Simlish". The name Simji therefore comes from the fusion of the words Simlish and Kanji (Kirce, 2024).

Linguistic patterns

As a result of people using a language over an extended period of time, some patterns will emerge. One of these that we can frequently find in Simlish is called reduplication. Reduplication is a morphological process in which a word or part of a word is repeated exactly or with a slight change. It is a very common linguistic feature across world's languages and serves various grammatical and semantic functions. For example, in Malay, it can be used to form non-exhaustive plurals like *burung-burung* meaning 'all those birds'. In English, an example of full reduplication, which means repeating the whole word, is *bye-bye*. Examples of partial reduplication with only changing a vowel could be *chit-chat*, *flip-flop* or *knick-knack* (Kirce, 2024).

In Simlish, we see a lot of examples of full reduplication, like *sul sul* – 'hello', *dag dag* – 'goodbye', *choo waga choo choo* – 'something is in the way', *baba* – 'I'm pregnant', *renato renato* – 'go away' and there are many more. We could even argue that there is some partial reduplication in words like *nooboo* – 'baby' or *hooba noobie* – 'what's up'. But since Simlish has no known grammar, we cannot really say how reduplication works in Simlish or what function it serves (Kirce, 2024).

Semantics and English translations

Despite Simlish starting as an improvised language, some of the words have been used so often in certain situations that they developed a meaning. Although there is no official dictionary of Simlish, fans have been creating unofficial dictionaries (Sims Simlish, 2012; Beck, 2023), assigning meanings to the gibberish words based on the context in which sims say them in and the emotions they express. Now, some of the words have official translations confirmed by EA[5] – some of the most well known being *sul sul* meaning 'hello', *dag dag*

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meaning 'goodbye', *nooboo* meaning 'baby' or *chumcha* meaning 'pizza' (EA, 2004).

Nevertheless, the voice acting for Simlish is still largely improvised. This is confirmed in a more recent interview with Maxis[6] voice director, who says that the regular cast of voice actors are improvising 90% of the time (Bassi, 2023). But they also mention that translating existing popular songs into Simlish is a different process.

Famous songs in Simlish

Something very interesting and unique about Simlish is that many popular songs have been translated into it. Artists like Katy Perry, Black Eyed Peas, Lily Allen, Depeche Mode, Jason Derulo, Anitta and many others recorded their original songs in Simlish (The Sims Wiki, 2025), bringing the familiar tunes with a new twist into The Sims games. As a byproduct, these songs are actually the largest source of Simlish, essentially serving as a "parallel corpus" between English and Simlish.

Apparently, EA has a dictionary of Simlish that they use to translate these songs. But wherever it falls short, they make up new words, all in a way that fits the melody and rhythm of the original song (Bassi, 2023). Unfortunately, the dictionary is not public and they probably will not share it. However, fans have been transcribing the Simlish lyrics and thus, kind of reconstructing the translations. Obviously, most of the fans are not linguists, and therefore they do not use phonetic transcription, but rather the English alphabet. This means the transcriptions are inexact and inconsistent. For example, the translation of the word 'you' is often transcribed as *voo* but sometimes as *vou* or even *vous*.

Because the language is improvised and has been developing over the years, the translations of the songs are not always consistent either. For instance, the word 'baby', both in the sense of a child and as a term of endearment, is confirmed to be *nooboo*. But as (Kirce, 2024) pointed out in her video, in Bryan Rice's song "There For You", 'baby' is translated as *bwayzay*. This is just one of many examples of inconsistencies in the Simlish translations, although it is fair to say that the translations are becoming more consistent in the newer songs.

Examples of English and Simlish lyrics side by side can be found in the paper by (Brouwer et al.,

2022) or in the videos on (GrenGoddess, 2025) YouTube channel.

Comparison with other fictional languages

Simlish is truly unique even in the realm of fictional languages. Due to its improvised nature, it can hardly compete with other constructed languages such as Star Trek's Klingon or J. R. R. Tolkien's Elvish languages Quenya and Sindarin. These are full-fledged languages with grammar, linguistic rules and vocabulary, designed by linguists for real communication. But that was never the goal of Simlish. The different intention is nicely illustrated when we compare Simlish to another constructed language "Dovahzul", the dragon language created for the video game Skyrim[7].

Dovahzul is also a fully developed, functional language with its own grammar, rules, alphabet and vocabulary. Its purpose is to further enhance the immersion and storytelling in the magical world of Skyrim. In contrast, Simlish adds a playful and humorous element to The Sims, breaking down the language barriers and allowing all players to understand and feel the emotions of sims through this seemingly unintelligible gibberish (Bracchi, 2023).

Conclusion

All in all, Simlish is a unique and fascinating language that has become an essential part of The Sims series. It is a language that is not meant to be understood in the traditional sense, but rather to convey emotions and the meaning of the words through its sounds. It was never intended to be a full-fledged language with grammar and structure. However, during its now 20+ years of existence, Simlish has been developing and expanding. Players and fans have been creating dictionaries, transcribing Simlish songs and even teaching how to speak Simlish. Although it is still a gibberish language, some very simple conversations can be held in Simlish, and it will be interesting to see how the language will continue to evolve in the future.

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[6]Maxis is the studio developing The Sims, a subsidiary of EA.

[7]The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is the full title of the game.

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