

*An extract of the foreword of 'A Reference Grammar of Vahn'*

I despise the term “Oligosynthetic”. It is a horrible, non descriptive word with little or no face value meaning. “Oligo” from the Greek “Oligos” meaning “few”, and “synthetic” from the Greek “Suntithenai” meaning “place together”. You could argue that is very descriptive, as an Oligosynthetic language is one in which a few things are placed together, however you must also remember that “synthetic” in modern language (in the context of linguistics) means “Characterized by the use of inflections rather than word order to express grammatical structure”; inflection is the modification of a word to express further meaning. Let’s have a look at a passage fragment in Toki Pona.

ma ali li jo e toki wan en sama. jan ali li kama tan nasin pi kama suno, li kama lon ma Sinale, li awen lon ni. jan li toki e ni: “kama! mi mute o pali e kiwen tomo, o seli e ona.” jan mute li toki e ni: “o kama! mi mute o pali e ma tomo e tomo palisa sulii. lawa pi tomo palisa li lon sewi kon. o nimi pi mi mute li kama sulii! mi wile ala e ni: mi mute li kan ala. mi mute li lon ma ali.” jan sewi Jawe li kama anpa, li lukin e ma tomo e tomo palisa pi jan lili mute.

I personally would not look at that and think “What an obviously synthetic language”. In fact, I would think the opposite. It looks rather like an isolating language. Many short words, all providing context to each other rather than synthesising in a traditional sense. So it seems very odd to me that a language I feel could be better described as isolating falls under the label of “Oligosynthetic”.

As such, I would propose (and will use as such through the course of this grammar), that a new term be defined. “Oligo” is a property of the morphemes of a language, not of any form of synthetic alignment, like Agglutinative or Fusional. The term I (as discussed with a group of my peers) would propose is “Oligomorphemic”. As such, Vahn would typologically be described as a “Oligomorphemic, Agglutinative, Neutral Aligned, SOV” language. This provides a much better description than combining the first two into “Oligosynthetic”. For the sake of brevity, as is often favoured, I would propose that the first two can still be combined, however into “Oligoagglutinative” in the case of a language like Vahn, and “Oligoisolating” in the case of a language like Toki Pona.