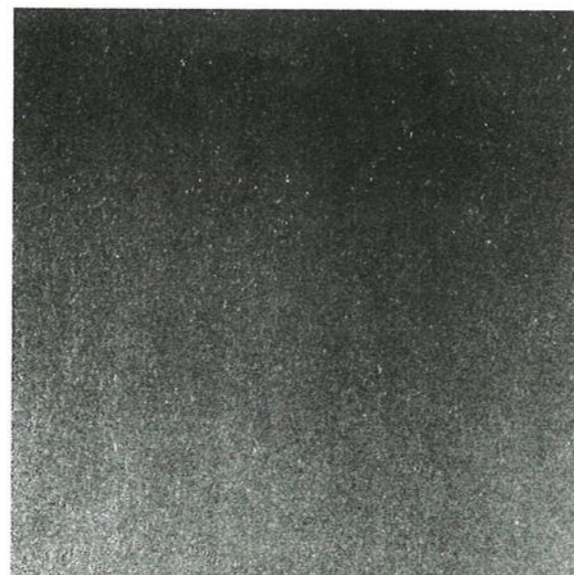


Visible Speech *



Visible Speech employs phonetic vocabularies and other oddities to visually reproduce conversations. Not only as a stand alone unit, but also as a part of a collective act when combined with other modules. It communicates by using constructed and non-constructed languages, through alphabets read by both humans and machines.



The Visible Speech module comes from a fascination for constructed languages¹, phonetic translations of speech and the never ending human desire to elaborate an ideal universal language. This leading interest has been translated towards the structure which sustains the module's technical core and interface: an instrument built and programmed with its own particular kind of widespread alphabet, human developed and machine-readable.

"[...]learned men have long since thought of some kind of language or universal characteristic by which all concepts and things can be put in beautiful order."

Gottfried W. Leibniz,
On the General Characteristics
[1679]



During the 17th century, Gottfried W. Leibniz – the German philosopher, famed as inventor of the modern binary number system and also for his exceptional optimism - started to dream about a universal language. He was trying to create a vocabulary able to rationalise universal concepts and numbers. A similar pattern to the machine language used in today's encoding systems based on binary arithmetics. Today, four centuries after Leibniz's utopian system was theorised, we can ask to what degree his dream has been accomplished.

Are our machines speaking the ultimate Characteristica Universalis?

Leibniz's ideal language was conceived to be effectively expressive so as to become universal. Today, by contrast, we perhaps face the opposite condition. We can see the proliferation of too many universal languages, aiming for the same result but differing at their cores. The dream of a Characteristica Universalis seems stuck in the complexity arising from the duality of human languages and machine languages, caught between the aim for entirety and the impossibility of reducing plurality. In a similar way machine languages of today can be really far removed from the user-friendliness that Leibniz theorised: "[...] a new language or script, that could be learned in one week or two".² Unfortunately today's scenario presents itself as radically different. While anyone can use and interact with programmed technologies, the knowledge of their language is limited to a comparatively small group of people. This language, whether it is the Characteristica Universalis we were supposed to reach, is trapped and carried by people everyday, as a blackbox filling our rooms and pockets.

1. A constructed language is a language (also known as a conlang, glossopoeia, artificial language, auxiliary language, and ideal language) that has been consciously created by an individual or group.
2. Gottfried W. Leibniz, Letter to Johan Friedrich von Hannover [1679].