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For the Conlanging Community and Beyond: A Review of David J. Peterson's *The Art of Language Invention*

by
Don Boozer

The Art of Language Invention: From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves, the Words Behind World-Building. David J. Peterson. New York: Penguin Books. 2015.
978-0-14-312646-1. \$17.00 (\$22.00 CAN). index. (E-book and Audio download also available.)

When the word *conlang* was enshrined within the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* in June 2014, many conlangers rightly rejoiced. It was a major milestone in the public awareness of the secret vice of language construction. The decision of Penguin - a major, mainstream publishing house - to release David J. Peterson's **The Art of Language Invention** (which, at its heart, is a conlanging how-to guide) establishes another high-water mark in the long process of making the public-at-large aware of the art and craft of language invention.

Conlangers, novices and long-time language creators alike, will find much to happily pore over in the book and will greatly appreciate Peterson's contribution to the subject at hand. However, the book is specifically designed to appeal to a wider audience than language creators alone.

Readers of Ben Zimmer, John McWhorter, and Steven Pinker's books on language will find Peterson's new book enjoyable as well. As John McWhorter himself says in his praise for **The Art of Language Invention**, it is "the handiest introduction in existence to what linguistics is."

Where Arika Okrent's **In the Land of Invented Languages** (2009) and Michael Adams' **From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages** (2011) examined the history and phenomenon of constructed languages (and established Okrent as a go-to expert on this topic), their works didn't look at the process of creating a language. Nonetheless, Peterson's book is also tailor-made to appeal to the same audience as these books, now looking at a new aspect of language creation: the techniques and tools.

Peterson's position is currently unique with respect to conlanging. The productions with which he has been involved are part of the popular Zeitgeist and have (for the most part) been wildly successful. This provides another built-in audience for the current work. While George R.R. Martin created Dothraki, it is Peterson's version of that language that the characters speak in *Game of Thrones*. Additionally, a fan base has built up around those languages created for the other television series that have included Peterson's work. People who have no intention of creating a language themselves want to learn all they can about Dothraki, Valyrian, Irathien, Castithan,

and the other languages Peterson has created. **The Art of Language Invention** will be a gold mine for them, too.

This expanded audience for a book unabashedly about conlanging by a proud, unapologetic conlanger makes it a significant work.

While a wider audience may come to a better understanding of the work that goes into creating a language through Peterson's book (and hopefully a better appreciation of the craft itself), it should be clearly stated that **The Art of Language Invention** is by no means the first step-by-step guide to conlanging. One of the most well-known works of this kind among conlangers remains the *Language Construction Kit*¹ (LCK) created by Mark Rosenfelder (aka Zompist) in the late 1990s. Rosenfelder also published a print version of the LCK in 2010 as well as follow-up volumes including **The Planet Construction Kit** (2010) and **Advanced Language Construction Kit** (2012). The LCK website is now available in English, Portuguese, Italian, and German versions and was also the basis of a site originally created by Pablo David Flores in the late 1990s: *How to create a language*.² Another more-concise effort to demonstrate the steps needed to create a language was the *BG [Bowling Green] Language Creation Guide* from Sheri Beth Wells-Jensen.³ These conlanging how-to sites did not reach far beyond the borders of the conlanging community nor were they necessarily intended to. Additionally, conlangers looking for a “manual” have also turned to Thomas Payne's **Describing Morphosyntax: A Guide for Field Linguists** (1997). This served as a robust template full of possibilities to consider including in one's language; however, it was written from the perspective of (and intended to aid) the field linguist not the conlanger.

Peterson has produced an enjoyable and well-crafted how-to manual for conlangers by a dedicated conlanger with an eye on educating the wider world on what's involved in practicing the art.

So, what does Peterson's work specifically offer the inquisitive reader?

To begin with, anyone who follows David J. Peterson on his social media outlets (e.g., Twitter⁴, Tumblr⁵), reads his blogs and website (e.g., Dothraki: A Language of Fire and Blood⁶, David J. Peterson's Web Thing⁷), or even happens upon his Reddit AMA⁸ from 2012 will instantly recognize the informal and enjoyable writing style displayed in **The Art of Language Invention**. Peterson's conversational style and use of pop culture references (more on this below) make the book accessible even when it is tackling complex topics. This also makes the availability of an audiobook version (read by Peterson himself) a welcome option, providing a perfect complement to the print version. While the reader gets to relish in the visual creativity of conlanging, the

¹ Language Construction Kit: <http://www.zompist.com/kit.html>

² How to create a language: http://www.angelfire.com/scifi2/nyh/how_all.html

³ BG Language Creation Guide: <http://www.fridaynightlinguistics.org/languagecreation/>

⁴ @Dedalvs, <https://twitter.com/dedalvs>

⁵ <http://dedalvs.tumblr.com/> (Imeimei)

⁶ <http://www.dothraki.com/>

⁷ <http://dedalvs.com/>

⁸ https://www.reddit.com/r/Fantasy/comments/r849y/mathchomaroon_my_name_is_david_j_peterson_and_im/

listener gets to hear Peterson pronounce all the natural language and conlang words and phrases appearing throughout the work. While the audiobook could not be reviewed in its entirety, an excerpt from Chapter 1 is available online.⁹ Peterson's complementary YouTube channel for the book also promises to be an interesting learning tool for the curious.¹⁰

Peterson peppers the book with pop culture references, and this provides one of the characteristics that makes his presentation of linguistic and con-linguistic themes unique. Among a myriad of others, making appearances are David Bowie, Iron Maiden, Sonata Arctica¹¹, Trapper Keepers, Heart¹², and infixation examples from *The Simpsons*.¹³ Cats also make appearances throughout the book.

Peterson provides an eclectic selection of natural languages to provide exemplars of various linguistic concepts: Arabic, Hindi, Inuktitut, etc. He also uses sentences to illustrate these concepts in an unexpected or humorous way. For example, using “The coyote gave the prisoner an onion” in explaining valency. In all, Peterson mentions 89 languages (plus English) in the book.¹⁴

Of those 89 languages, *well over* three dozen are non-Petersonian conlangs. It is Peterson’s enthusiasm for using other conlangers’ creations to provide examples of the limitless possibilities of the language creation arts that sets this work apart. He provides kudos to Sylvia Sotomayor’s Kēlen¹⁵, Carsten Becker’s Ayeri¹⁶, Denis Moskowitz’s Rikchik¹⁷, Doug Ball’s Skerre¹⁸, and many more. Additionally, linguistic constructions get conlang examples. Peterson even uses his own little-known¹⁹ non-commercial creation, Kamakawi²⁰, throughout **The Art of Language Invention** and even includes it as one of the phrasebook appendices. He has expressed a fondness for this conlang, and it even appears in second place on the index directly below Dothraki on his own Web Thing²¹ site. The inclusion of these constructed languages clearly demonstrates Peterson’s use of his celebrity to not just promote his own work but his passion to expose that expanded audience discussed earlier to the wider conlanging community’s artists and their work. He has consistently done this in many of his interviews and articles, and the presence of those conlangers highlighted in **The Art of Language Invention** continue to display his respect for the craft in general and for those conlangers whose work deserve wider recognition.

⁹ <https://soundcloud.com/penguin-audio/the-art-of-language>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgJSf-fmdfUsSlcr7A92-aA>

¹¹ <http://sonataarctica.info/>

¹² the musical group

¹³ on page 101 for the curious

¹⁴ <http://dedalvs.tumblr.com/post/129228857180/list-of-languages-in-the-art-of-language-invention>

¹⁵ <http://www.terjemar.net/kelen.php>

¹⁶ <http://benung.nfshost.com/>

¹⁷ <http://www.suberic.net/~dmm/rikchik/rikchik.html>

¹⁸ <http://dedalvs.conlang.org/smileys/2014.html>

¹⁹ that is, little-known outside the conlanging community

²⁰ <http://dedalvs.conlang.org/kamakawi/main.html>

²¹ <http://dedalvs.com/>

As for layout, the book moves from the building blocks of language (Sounds) to the building blocks of meaning (Words). Peterson then looks at how languages change over time and how conlangers can exploit that (Evolution). The chapters finish with an examination of the various methods of how languages get represented visually (The Written Word).

However, do not think that the fact that **The Art of Language Invention** only has four chapters implies that only four topics are covered. Far from it. Within those chapters are almost ten times the number of various linguistic topics of varying complexity including Phonotactics, Pragmatic Intonation, Contour and Register Tone Languages, Sign Language, Alien Sound Systems, Grammatical Gender, Nominal Inflection Exponence, Valency, Lexical Evolution, Types of Orthographies, and Typography. Through it all, Peterson's friendly writing style provides a reassuring tone regardless of the subject. And even David J. Peterson finds some language aspects difficult: "And now we get to my least favorite part of language. Not just creating languages, or conlangs: language *period*... no language ever created has a simple tense, modality, aspect system... It's also one of the most important parts, which makes everything just the worst. So. Let's jump right in!" And he can be encouraging as well: For example, in summing up case systems: "Once you create a case language, you won't go back -- or at least not without a fight. (And, yes, *without a fight* would be the abessive case.)"

The "Case Study" accompanying each of the four chapters is a great feature, and one that will be devoured and dissected by *Game of Thrones* and *Defiance* fans:

- The Sound of Dothraki (Sounds)
- Irathient Nouns (Words)
- High Valyrian Verbs (Evolution)
- Evolution of the Castithan Writing System (The Written Word)

These provide wonderful concrete examples of the multitude of concepts discussed in each chapter.

Fans of Peterson's languages will also be thrilled at the eight Phrase Books that complete the book, each with 15 translated phrases. The sentences are based on Dothraki so readers will learn that the famous "My sun and stars" phrase of the horse-lords is "Ichuko veraho ki shiralino" in Castithan. Each of the phrases are also written in the native orthography of the language, again providing fans an enjoyable experience.

Finally, some readers may be tempted to skip over the book's final section entitled Postscript, but this would be a mistake. Readers familiar with Peterson's 2002 piece *The Conlang Manifesto*²² may see shadows of it in the opening paragraphs of the Postscript where he discusses the meaning of "art" and how it relates specifically to the art of language invention. As previously, he makes a compelling apologia for conlanging as an art form. However, he also expands on this idea and looks to the future of language construction. As part of this, Peterson once again makes a strong statement in support of the broader conlanging community and urges readers to seek out the work of others online:

²² <http://dedalvs.conlang.org/notes/manifesto.php>

“The only reason people know who I am or know a thing about any of my languages is because of *Game of Thrones* and *Defiance* and the rest of it. But if you enjoyed looking at my languages even a little bit, I guarantee you’ll find others you like even more elsewhere. We haven’t seen a conlanging masterpiece yet, but when we do, I guarantee you that it won’t have been created for a show or film. A good conlang takes time to develop, and a conlanger who works on their own has all the time in the world. There’s no doubt in my mind that the best is yet to come.”

It is Peterson’s unflagging enthusiasm for fellow conlangers and their work that sets **The Art of Language Invention** apart from any other recent book looking at language creation. He has become one of the most-visible, well-known, and approachable conlangers ever but has also become the quintessential cheerleader for the art of language invention. This book clearly demonstrates his determination to promote that art and its artists to the wider world to the best of his ability. The conlanging community can be thankful for a new how-to guide, full of useful information in an eminently readable style. Fans of Peterson’s languages will have a field day poring over the newly-presented details of their favorite conlangs. And lovers of language will be introduced to an art they may not even have known existed and to the practitioners of that art.

In short, how is the **The Art of Language Invention?** *Feya!*²³

*** Bonus Review ***

A Conlanging Perspective on *The Interpreter's Tale*

The Interpreter's Tale: A Word With Too Many Meanings. E.M. Epps. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. 2014. 978-1-50-329562-9. \$11.00 pbk.

E.M. Epps has written an engaging story of political intrigue, international relations, love in many forms, and -- of course -- language. And while it does take some time to keep the characters and their multisyllabic names and nicknames straight, the reader will quickly adjust and be swept up in the tale. The plotline is original and full of unexpected twists and turns.

This being a review with an emphasis on conlanging (and a bonus review to complement the piece above), it should be noted that one will *not* find a glossary or extensive passages in the book in Henanue, Tsiane, Hadra, or any of the many dialects hinted at by Epps. Instead, the author has done a masterful job of hinting at the complexity of those languages and depicting the difficulty with which one communicates in a foreign tongue. The frustrations of the polyglot interpreter of the

²³ Excellent! in Kamakawi

title, Eliadmaru Devesento Faraa (also known as “Marika”), are clearly portrayed and can be fully appreciated by the reader.

One particularly effective plot point shows Eliadmaru becoming increasingly frustrated with the Ambassador in his delegation who thinks he can speak the native language but who sounds ridiculous, unbeknownst to the Ambassador but glaringly apparent to Eliadmaru. Epps shows this cleverly in several passages including:

[The Ambassador said,] “Today, I said ‘establish a friendship,’ and you said something completely different!...”

“No, I didn’t make a mistake,” he said... “But in that case there was really only one way to put it in Tsiane.”

“How the hell can it be correct?” growled the Ambassador. “Establish is *-rasa-*, ‘friendship’ is *atae*, and you didn’t say either such!”

“You can’t say it that way in Tsiane,” he said, keeping his voice as flat as he was able.

“Of course, you can!” the Ambassador insisted.

“You *can*, but it means something different. Unless you meant to very formally declare you want Dayono and the Empire to become drinking buddies? If you did, I stand corrected.”

And the conversation escalates from there. Epps’ subtle hinting at the nuances of Tsiane are extremely effective. “In such-and-such dialect a voiced bilabial stop becomes a fricative intervocally. In *these* prefixes, but not these, a final nasal assimilates to the same point of articulation as a consonant immediately following.”

And conlangers also get to guess at the structure of the languages. The Tsiane word *-gitsa-* could mean “increase” or “diminish” or “assist” or something else entirely (it appears in a philosophical treatise). There is also *-pefa-* “...that meant ‘abhor,’ and word he wanted meant ‘avoid.’ *-Pefona-, -pespuroi-, -pefa-, -pefa-, -pefa-*...” All those hyphens hint at both prefixes and suffixes, and that list could be either conjugations or a list of similar words. Again, tantalizing clues!

Readers also discover that the Tsiane word for “a body without a soul” is *latsareta*. In another passage, we get a hint of another language: “She said a word in Hadra, a simple spell. *You are bound.*” So, one knows that Hadra encodes entire English sentences in a single word. Common enough in our world’s languages, but a clue nonetheless.

The reader also gets a sense of the orthography of Tsiane with phrases like “swirls of Tsiane” and “there was a ligature in one of the words that he never mastered, which meant that he got it right every time and then messed something else up directly after...”

Epps does provide a handy pronunciation guide²⁴ on her website (complete with audio files). It would be interesting to see entirely fleshed out versions of the languages

²⁴ <http://www.emepps.com/itpron.php>

portrayed in **The Interpreter's Tale**, but the lack of them in the book in no way detracts from the storyline. In fact, the glimpses the reader gets add to the verisimilitude and allow one to truly get an idea of the complicated work of the interpreter. It may be interesting to see what someone could do with the names and scattered vocabulary Epps provides, but the book - standing firmly on its own - is an entertaining read for language lovers of all kinds.