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~ *Conlanging* ~

An Introduction to the Art of Language Creation

Don Boozer

Hello! Guten Tag! Bonjour! ¡Hola! Konnichiwa!

No doubt many people will recognize these as ways to say “Hello” in German, French, Spanish, and Japanese. All of these, along with lesser-known languages such as Basque, Georgian, Quechua, and even extinct languages like Etruscan, Gothic, and Akkadian, all have one thing in common: They evolved naturally, arising organically within a group of people through various natural forces. No single person defined their vocabularies, designed their grammars, or deliberately decided to create them.

Saluton! Mae govannen! nuqneH! M'athchomaroon!

Fewer people may recognize these as ways to say “Hello!” in Esperanto, Sindarin, Klingon, and Dothraki. All of these are **constructed languages**. Constructed languages, or **conlangs**, stand at the other end of the spectrum from languages like German, French, Quechua, and Gothic. In conlangs, a single person (or a small group) defined the vocabulary, designed the grammar, and deliberately decided to create a language. Why would someone want to do this when there are so many “real” languages to learn? The reasons are many and varied, from the simple artistic desire to play with linguistic concepts to the obsession to provide the world with a universal language. **Conlangers** (those who construct languages) bring a myriad of skills, tastes, and goals to the art and craft of **conlanging**. Conlanging is a worldwide phenomenon practiced by people of all ages. Questions some may ask about conlanging include “How do you go about inventing a whole language?” and “Why would you want to do that anyway?”

Although not as long as naturally-occurring languages, the long and illustrious pedigree of conlanging stretches from ancient Greece to the present-day, and the debate over language creation as a viable endeavor can be traced back as far. Although not a conlanger, the character of Hermogenes in Plato's dialogue [*Cratylus*](#) espouses the basic concepts behind the art and craft of conlanging by arguing that men apply “a piece of their own voice...to the thing.” Another ancient Greek, Athenaeus of Naucratis, in Book III of his [*The Deipnosophists*](#), tells the story of two figures that could very well be called ancient conlangers: Dionysius of Sicily and Alexarchus. Dionysius of Sicily made up words like *menandros* “virgin” (from *menei* “waiting” and *andra* “husband”) and *menekratēs* “pillar” (from *menei* “it remains in one place” and *kratei* “it is strong”), *parthenos* and *stulos* in standard Greek of the time. Athenaeus also recounts the story of Alexarchus who “introduced a peculiar vocabulary, referring to a rooster

as a “dawn-crier,” a barber as a “mortal-shaver,” a drachma as “worked silver”...and a herald as an *aputēs* [from *ēputa* “loud-voiced”]. “He once wrote something...to the public authorities in Casandreia...As for what this letter says, in my opinion not even the Pythian god could make sense of it.” Conlanging did not get any respect from Athenaeus.

Many religions recount spiritual or mystical origins for the creation of language. The Judeo-Christian tradition has Adam giving “names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field”. (Genesis 2:19-20) Adam could be considered one of the first conlangers mentioned in literature. This tradition also attributes the multiplicity of languages in existence to the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9). One of the first well-attested conlangs also has a spiritual aspect to its origin. St. Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th-century-CE German abbess, described a language revealed to her as a “divine revelation” in visions. Hildegard’s *Lingua Ignota* (“unknown language” in Latin) was essentially an extensive list of words (defining concepts from the spiritual to the mundane) which she used with Latin to compose hymns. Examples of words in the *Lingua Ignota* include:

- *Aiegan* = “angel”
- *Diuueliz* = “Devil”
- *Vanix* = “woman”
- *Jur* = “man”
- *Lasinz* = “a strand or lock of hair”
- *Fugizlo* = “privy-cleaner” or “filth-talker”

Along with her language, Hildegard also had a script with which to write the *Lingua Ignota* known as the *Litterae Ignotae* or “unknown letters”. Conlangs with spiritual overtones were not isolated to the West, however, as shown by [Balaibalan](#) (or *Bâleybelen*) which blended inspiration from Turkish, Arabic, and Persian in the 1500s CE.

The spiritual gave way to more humanistic goals in conlanging in the 17th century. During this time, the goal of creating a “universal” auxiliary language or *auxlang*, which would transcend nations and unify peoples, began to take place. As far back as the 1620s, one finds universal language schemes proposed by authors and thinkers like [Paul Guldin](#) (who calculated the number of possible locutions generated by 23 letters), [Marin Mersenne](#) (who considered the idea of a universal language in his *Harmonie universelle*), [Francis Lodwick](#) (who published the first full universal language scheme in 1647 in his ***A common writing: whereby two, although not understanding one the others language, yet by the helpe thereof, may communicate their minds one to another***), and René Descartes (who, in a letter to Marin Mersenne in 1629, advocated for a universal language). In 1661, [George Dalgarno](#), a Scottish intellectual, wrote *Ars signorum* which contains the first proposed universal language based on a systematic categorization of reality from animals, humans, and plants to thoughts, feelings, and beyond. John Wilkins would refine and expand on Dalgarno’s ideas in his 1668 work ***An essay towards a real character and a philosophical language*** which laid out both the categorization of reality and a full-fledged universal language based on that classification. The 19th and early 20th centuries were littered

with innumerable attempts at creating the perfect auxlang including [Volapük](#), [Ido](#), [Ro](#), [Weltsprache](#), [Solresol](#) (a language which could be spoken, signed, sent by semaphore, and even expressed by numbers or colors), *Latino sine flexione* (“Latin without inflections”), and many others including *Esperanto*.

The most famous (and arguably most successful) auxlang is *Esperanto* and was created by L.L. Zamenhof in the late 1800s. Born a Russian-speaking Jew in what is now Poland, Zamenhof saw first-hand the trouble caused by ethnic and nationalistic tension. His theory was that tolerance could be fostered by use of a language unencumbered by a connection to a specific country, and Zamenhof dedicated himself to creating just such a language. Along with a group of friends in school, the young idealist created a workable language, but his father (uneasy about the reaction to a “secret” language in their contemporary political climate) burned all of the notebooks containing the language while Zamenhof was away at the University of Warsaw. By 1887, Zamenhof had reconstituted his work and published a textbook entitled ***Lingvo Internacia*** under the pseudonym *Dr. Esperanto* (“Dr. Hopeful” in his new language). The language *Lingvo Internacia* quickly became referred to by the pseudonym of its author, and *Esperanto* was born. Over the years, the language has ebbed and flowed, but today there are an estimated two-million Esperanto speakers worldwide. The Internet has also opened up unlimited possibilities with lively online communities and informational websites using Esperanto with [Lernu!](#) being a good place to start for those curious about the language. [Google](#) and [Wikipedia](#) ([Vikipedio](#)) are even available in the language. Zamenhof’s birthday, December 15, continues to be celebrated as Esperanto Day or *Esperanto-Tago*.

Returning to the 16th and 17th centuries, this time period also saw the rise of another kind of conlang in addition to the auxlang: A language to add verisimilitude to fictional worlds. These are often known as *artlangs* for artistic languages (i.e., conlangs used in or as a work of art). One of the earliest examples of this is Sir Thomas More’s [language and script](#) which accompanied his *Utopia* published in 1516. Another early artlang is the fictional language in François Rabelais’ 1532 work ***Gargantua and Pantagruel***. The first English-language piece of science fiction, Francis Godwin’s ***The man in the moone or A discourse of a voyage thither*** (written under his pseudonym Domingo Gonsales) described a “musical” Lunar language. Other early examples of artlangs used in fiction are the snippets of Lilliputian (e.g., *Quinbus Flestrin* “Man-Mountain”, their name for Gulliver), Houyhnhnm (intelligent horses which call themselves in their own language “the perfection of nature”), and others in Jonathan Swift’s ***Gulliver’s Travels***, originally published in 1726.

Arguably the most famous *artlanger* (a conlanger that creates artistic languages) was J.R.R. Tolkien, best known for his books ***The Hobbit*** and ***The Lord of the Rings***. What most people don’t know is that Tolkien was, first and foremost, a “language-maker”. In fact, in a letter to his son Christopher dated Feb. 21, 1958, Tolkien says “Nobody believes me when I say that [*The Lord of the Rings*] is an attempt to create a world in which a form of language agreeable to my personal aesthetic might seem real. But it is true. An enquirer (among many)

asked what the L.R. was all about, and whether it was an allegory. And I said it was an effort to create a situation in which a common greeting would be *elen si-'la lu-'menn omentielmo* ['A star shines on the hour of our meeting'], and that the phrase long antedated the book.” Two of Tolkien’s “Elvish” languages, [Quenya](#) and [Sindarin](#), are the best-known and came to even more prominence with Peter Jackson’s film adaptations of ***The Lord of the Rings*** released in the early 2000s when Jackson insisted on having dialogue in the films in Tolkien’s languages.

As entertainment diversified into new venues like television and film, conlangs began to be utilized in those media as well. The ***Star Trek*** franchise (which began as a television series in the late 1960s) gave the world one of the most widely-recognized conlangs: *Klingon* (or to use the “native” word for the language: *tlhIngan Hol*). The Klingon language, designed to sound harsh and alien, was created for ***Star Trek***’s quintessential warrior alien species by Mark Okrand. Using a few lines in Klingon written by James Doohan (“Scotty” on the original series) for the first ***Star Trek*** motion picture as his jumping-off point, Okrand created the Klingon for ***Star Trek III: The Search for Spock***. The language though took on a life of its own when Okrand published several books on the language (including the essential [Klingon Dictionary](#)). Fans of the language founded the [Klingon Language Institute](#) (KLI) in 1992. Some of the KLI’s most memorable accomplishments are full Klingon translations of Shakespeare plays, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and portions of the Bible. The Shakespeare translations came about as a result of a line in ***Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*** where a character states “You have not experienced Shakespeare until you have read him in the original Klingon.” Another character then recites the line *taH pagh taHbe'* “To be or not to be.” Members of the KLI took up the challenge of “restoring” Shakespeare to its “original Klingon”.

And with Klingon, we arrive at the present-day. Conlangs of all kinds have proliferated, and a vibrant community has grown up thanks to the Internet. There are a number of thriving listservs and discussion boards including [Conlang-L](#) (founded in 1991, the oldest conlang-related mailing list), [Zompist Bulletin Board](#) (a popular forum for discussing conlangs, conlanging, linguistics, and more), and [FrathWiki](#) (a collaborative wiki collecting conlang-related information). The [Language Creation Society](#) was founded in 2007 in part to support the **Language Creation Conferences (LCC)**, in-person conferences which allow conlangers to present papers, hold workshops, and share ideas with other conlangers and those curious about language creation.

So, why would someone want to create a language? What motivates conlangers? Two pieces in particular, separated by more than 70 years, lay out a solid case for why people may want to create languages and why this is a legitimate pursuit. The first is an eloquent answer to these questions from an essay written in 1931 by none other than J.R.R. Tolkien himself entitled “[A Secret Vice](#)” from the idea that language creation is a solitary effort with practitioners of the art rarely having contact with each other. Tolkien’s fascination with language went back to his boyhood in the early 1900s when he mastered Latin and Greek, was

passably proficient in Gothic and Finnish, and was already coming up with languages of his own. Tolkien speaks eloquently about the “linguistic faculty” and its importance in language creation: “The linguistic faculty ... is more highly developed in others, and may lead not only to polyglots but to poets; to savourers of linguistic flavours, to learners and users of tongues, who take pleasure in the exercise.” He goes on to say that the “instinct for ‘linguistic invention’ - the fitting of notion to oral symbol, and *pleasure in contemplating the new relation established* is rational, and not perverted. In these invented languages the pleasure is more keen than it can be even in learning a new language - keen though it is to some people in that case - because more personal and fresh, more open to experiment of trial and error. And it is capable of developing into an art, with refinement of the construction of the symbol...”

The other much more recent apologia for language creation is entitled [The Conlang Manifesto](#) written by David J. Peterson. The “Manifesto” began as [a humble post](#) to the CONLANG-L listserv in January of 2002. Being that Peterson is (like Tolkien) a conlanger, he gives an impassioned defense of the craft even though to him “it seems odd to have to defend language creation.” In addition to a well-reasoned argument as to the legitimacy of conlanging, Peterson points out that conlangers appreciate “the multifariousness and beauty of language” and conlanging “allows one to better understand language itself.”

With that historical background and defense of the art of conlanging, we can now take a closer look at several language creators and examples of their work. This is only a very, very small fraction of the possible conlangs and conlangers that could be mentioned. Some of the following are well-known in popular culture, others are only encountered on the Internet. A good source for conlangs used in books and movies is [The Conlanger’s Library](#). An extensive list of conlangs is available at [FraithWiki](#) as well. Those interested in exploring in more depth are encouraged to check out these resources.

David Peterson (mentioned above as the author of “The Conlang Manifesto”) is best known for being the creator of Dothraki, spoken on HBO’s *Game of Thrones* television series. Arguably one of the most famous pieces of dialogue in Dothraki is the [speech given by Khal Drogo](#) in the seventh episode of season one. Here is an excerpt from that speech (the full transcript can be found on the [Learn Dothraki Forum](#)):

Anha vidrik khalasares anni jim, finaana nakhoe rhaesheser, majin adothrak hrazef ido yomme Havazhifi Kazga ven et vo khal avvos.

“I will take my khalasar west to where the world ends and ride wooden horses across the black salt sea as no khal has done before.”

In addition to Dothraki, Peterson has created [many other languages](#) and also is currently “Alien Language and Culture Consultant” for the Syfy Channel series [Defiance](#). The two languages that Peterson has created (so far) for that project are Irathient and Castithan which also have their own native scripts.

John Quijada’s creation, [Ithkuil](#), represents a third category of conlang (in addition to

artlangs and auxlangs), the engelang or “engineered language” which is engineered or designed with a specific purpose in mind or to test a specific hypothesis about language. “Ithkuil’s primary purpose,” [according to Quijada](#), “is to demonstrate how human language could be used to convey much deeper levels of human cognition and semantic nuance/exactitude than are found in natural human languages.” A by-product of this purpose is a more concise language as well. For example, Marcel Duchamp’s [Nude Descending a Staircase](#) can be described in exacting detail in Ithkuil with only six words:

Aukkras êqutta ogvëuļa tnou’elkwa pal-lši augwaikštūlnàmbu.

“An imaginary representation of a nude woman in the midst of descending a staircase in a step-by-step series of tightly-integrated ambulatory bodily movements which combine into a three-dimensional wake behind her, forming a timeless, emergent whole to be considered intellectually, emotionally and aesthetically.”

Quijada and his creation was also featured in an article entitled “[Utopian for Beginners](#)” written by Joshua Foer for the December 2012 issue *The New Yorker*.

[Kēlen](#), created by Sylvia Sotomayor, is a “verb-less” conlang with [fantastic writing systems](#) including an [elaborate interlaced alphabet](#). Sotomayor’s creation is a blend of engelang (Is it possible to create a language without verbs?) and artlang (with a fictional culture that speaks the language). [A number of texts](#) demonstrating the verb-less-ness of the language are translated at the website dedicated to Kēlen including the fable of the North Wind and the Sun: *se mūrāna masīrien; se malō; iēlte teteñ anpēņeni ien la ma pa antāken anānexa makēñ*: “The north wind. The sun. Once long ago they had an argument over who had the most strength.” What appear as verbs in these lines are actually translations of verb-less sentences in Kēlen.

Mark Rosenfelder (aka Zompist) has created [an entire world](#) with multiple families of languages. One is Verdurian which looks like this (as excerpted from a [Verdurian newspaper article](#)):

Alric Dalu miže kalloga soan rëcoran, eglérce so trastoštát nabrei Dorotád’ei Müseii, ke befelme so prosizel, er soa řavica er soi zoni facore lië. Soa ana daluy, Tilye saza, cumlädne piro zië, er so tihy medro zië cum soen kallogin er orátin incretre soem uemem bed’ecië.

“King Alric addressed those present, commending the excellence of Captain Dorotád’ Müsey, the commander of the expedition, and the courage and experience of his crew. Crown Princess Tilye accompanied her father, and her quiet dignity amid the speeches and prayers gladdened the hearts of observers.”

Rosenfelder is also the author of the highly-influential [Language Construction Kit](#) as well as the moderator of the [Zompist Bulletin Board](#) mentioned above.

So, how does one go about even starting to create a language from scratch? Mark Rosenfelder’s [Language Construction Kit](#) (LCK) is a great place to start. The Kit goes through the basic process of language creation step-by-step from choosing the sounds one wants to incorporate to creating conlang dialects. But the LCK isn’t the only resource or only way to

begin to create a language. There are various levels of conlanging and some are more entry-level than others. For example, a basic “naming language” can be constructed to provide names to fictional characters or places. These kinds of conlangs have a very limited vocabulary, no need for grammar, and can be a good exercise in playing with the sounds of language. At the other end are the families of conlangs created by Tolkien, Rosenfelder, and others. These conlangs begin with a proto-conlang from which multiple dialects can be constructed. Peterson also began his creation process for Dothraki, Castithan, and Irathient with an earlier form of the languages and “evolved” the version used in the television series from those. One sample text that many conlangers use to “test drive” their language is, fittingly enough, the story of [the Tower of Babel](#) in Genesis 11:1-9. For those curious about creating their own language, there are several tutorials to help people experiment with conlanging at the [Education](#) page of [The Conlanger’s Library](#).

Even if one decides not to engage in conlanging oneself, he or she can still come to appreciate the work that goes into creating languages like Quenya, Klingon, Dothraki, Esperanto or any other of the myriad conlangs used in literature, movies, television, or society-at-large. Conlanging can be appreciated as an art form the same as a piece of music or a painting. Even if one doesn’t play a musical instrument or paint, one can enjoy the auditory and visual pleasure of taking each of these in. When one hears or reads a conlang in a movie, for example, if it’s well done, one can enjoy the verisimilitude it provides. Does it fit the character speaking it well? Does the conlang convey a deeper cultural motif and add to the narrative? Does the actor speak it fluently, giving a sense that it’s a natural way to communicate?

So, in conclusion, conlanging has a long and illustrious pedigree. While it may be an uncommon endeavor, it is an enjoyable linguistic hobby for many people and has found its way into many facets of entertainment. Esperanto continues to be an international form of communication for thousands of people worldwide. As Peterson says in “The Conlanger’s Manifesto”, conlanging helps those who create languages appreciate the “the multifariousness and beauty of language”, but everyone can begin to learn to appreciate the multifariousness and beauty of conlangs.