

Fiat Lingua

Title: The Secret World of Conlanging – An Overview of Tolkien’s “Secret Vice”

Author: Robin Rowan

MS Date: 12-06-2020

FL Date: 09-01-2022

FL Number: FL-000084-00

Citation: Rowan, Robin. 2020. "The Secret World of Conlanging – An Overview of Tolkien’s “Secret Vice”." FL-000084-00, *Fiat Lingua*, <<http://fiatlingua.org>>. Web. 01 September 2022.

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Robin G. Rowan

Arizona State University

2019 – 2020

Abstract

This essay provides a brief overview of conlanging from the perspective of a non-conlanger. It clarifies what a conlang is from this same perspective and places conlanging in a historical context, especially as regards what has motivated people to create conlangs and the disdain with which some people have viewed such efforts. The terminology of conlangs is presented with a concise examination of several conlangs and their histories regarding how and why they were created and by whom. These include Esperanto, Klingon, and Láadan. Research included academic sources, internet search, and personal correspondence among others. The usefulness of conlangs as a means to study the nature of language and communication, as well as how conlangs create authenticity and depth in television, movies, and literature, is explored. While there may or may not ever be a true “universal language” constructed language, the value of conlanging and its popularity can be expected to continue.

Key words:

Eperanto, Klingon, Láadan, Okrent, *Star Trek*, Okrand, conlang, constructed language, science fiction

*Biography of author inserted at end of document.

The Secret World of Conlanging – An Overview of Tolkien’s “Secret Vice”

What is a Conlang you ask? It’s a question I might have asked not too long ago. Merriam-Webster defines it as “an invented language intended for human communication [with] planned and cohesive phonological, grammatical, and syntactical systems.”¹ J. R. R. Tolkien referred to it as his “secret vice”² while others consider it a foolish waste of time or even something only the misguided would pursue. Dawson and Phelan define it as “A language that has been designed by an individual or group for a specific purpose, such as use in a fictional world or for international communication, but did not originate as the native language of any speech community.”³ I interviewed Joseph Windsor, the president of the Language Creation Society, via email and he would find Dawson and Phelan’s definition the better of the two. He said you would find various “official” definitions of conlangs and conlanging but says dictionary definitions are somewhat restrictive. He says: a conlang need not be developed for human communication – conlangs are developed for alien species in Sci-Fi & Fantasy all the time. So...a conlang is a language that [is] artificially created; conlanging is the process of creating a language.”⁴

If you define the success of a conlang in terms of something that develops a large community of native speakers, most conlangs have been failures, often drawing harsh criticism and ridicule from others, even those holding the highest office. For example, when James Ruggles who began his 1889 book *A Universal Language, Formed on Philosophical and Analogical Principles* with a dedication that appealed to the Congress of the United States that

¹ Merriam Webster On-Line, 2019

² Smith, pg. not available

³ Department of Linguistics, the Ohio State University, Columbus, OH ADD PG Number

⁴ p.c. Joseph Windsor, PhD

“even if they did not find his project “of sufficient weight to be entitled to your legislative notice,”⁵ that they at least take a look at his ideas. Congress never took any action and the only response to his efforts was a letter from John Quincy Adams “who said that his “opinion long since formed, unfavorable to all projects of this character has perhaps influenced [my judgement]. From the examination, necessarily superficial, which I have been able to give it, I consider it creditable to your ingenuity.”⁶ Perhaps something to be a little proud of, as Okrent points out, not exactly a “ringing endorsement.”⁷ So, if failure and ridicule are such common reactions, why bother to create languages at all?

In the 2017 documentary, *Conlanging: The Art of Crafting Tongues*, dozens of conlangers were interviewed regarding their obsession with creating a language. It seems there are as many motivations as there are conlangers.⁸

Windsor, who holds a PhD in Linguistics, describes his path to conlanging as beginning with a request to present seminars about both Klingon and theoretical “how-to” conlang classes. Once he had gotten familiar with it he: “started conlanging and found a lot of fun in it.”⁹ So far he has created about 11 conlangs. Some are written using Romanized alphabets, some employ glyphs, and several are spoken languages with no attachment to a system of writing. The aspect of conlanging that stands out for him is the play of phonology and morpho-syntax. For example, what would a “forked tongue lizard language [...] sound like if they had one.”¹⁰

There is no doubt that the process of conlanging can be enjoyable, especially for someone like Windsor who focuses on linguistics and language processes. However, some conlangers

⁵ Okrent pg. 92

⁶ Ibid pg. 93

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Watkins

⁹ Windsor

¹⁰ Ibid

have far more personal and intimate motivations for delving into this challenge. Aaron Simon, a transgender conlanger, created a personal and original language as a means of finding “a private space [...] for self-expression.”¹¹ As a closeted transgender teen, Simon grew up in a home with an intrusive father whom he describes as “wanting to know everything going on in the household.”¹² Simon had no real privacy as his father looked for and read everything he could find that Simon had written. Simon lived under this constant and very intrusive scrutiny while wrestling to find an identity. First, Simon tried writing in various natural languages but found that his father could easily “google” anything written in Spanish or German. It was clear to Simon that a new, private language might provide the emotional space needed for self-discovery.

As “Sandic” evolved, Simon’s father’s attempts to intrude on Simon’s inner life grew less and less successful. Simon describes this transformation as “suddenly I was out in the rain, holding an umbrella over my head and my father couldn’t get to me anymore.”¹³ Both a written and spoken language, Simon has developed it to the point where even the household dogs understand commands in the invented tongue.¹⁴

Conlangs can be placed into different categories in order to distinguish why they were created. The following table provides a guide to these categories, examples of what conlangs fall into that category, as well as some of the general terminology of conlanging.

Language Creation Society Table of Conlanging Terms https://conlang.org/	
Conlanging, like any specialization, has acquired its own set of distinctive terms. Below is a list of commonly encountered terms used in the art and craft of conlanging.	
artlang	Short for "artistic language." A language created for artistic or aesthetic reasons, whether to stand on its own merits or to be used in fiction. Examples include Ayeri , Verdurian , Teonaht , Tolkien's Elvish languages, Klingon , etc.

¹¹ Watkins

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

auxlang	Short for "auxiliary language." These conlangs are designed for the express purpose of serving as a means of international communication, with lesser or greater degrees of success. The best known auxlang is Esperanto , which was devised as a neutral means of communication. Other auxlangs include Ido , Volapük , Interlingua , Solresol , and Ro .
Babel text	Genesis 11:1-9. This text, the story of the Tower of Babel , is frequently used by conlangers as a translation exercise. By utilizing a common text, conlangs can be compared both with each other and with natlangs. The concept of using these verses as the standard translation "test drive" was devised by Jeffrey Henning, creator of Langmaker.com .
canon	The "official" source of information on a particular conlang. Klingon speakers talk of the Okrandian Canon (from Marc Okrand).
conlang	Short for "constructed language." Types of conlangs include artlangs, auxlangs, and engelang. Other names for conlangs include model languages, artificial languages, imaginary languages, invented languages, or planned languages.
conlanger	One who invents languages.
engelang	Short for "engineered language." These conlangs include loglangs as well as unique languages (like Ithkuil) designed to meet specific objective criteria.
loglang	Short for "logical language." These conlangs are designed using philosophical and/or logical parameters, often allowing only unambiguous statements. Examples include Loglan and Lojban .
natlang	Short for "natural language." These include English, French, Spanish, Gaelic, Finnish, Tibetan, Quechua, Basque, etc., etc., etc.
glossopoeia	(gloss-o-pea-ah). From the Greek words "tongue/language" and "to make." Another term for the artistic construction of languages. An alternative form is glossopoesis. Glossopoeic is the adjective and a glossopoeist is a conlanger. The word was coined by Steve Deyo (former editor of <i>Glossopoeic Quarterly</i>) in the early 1990s. Compare to the English word mythopoeia "myth-making."
naming language	A minimalist conlang used for the purpose of creating names for people, places, and things either in fiction or in a gaming environment. A naming language usually concentrates on sounds and words only, without any major focus on grammar.
neography	Literally, "new-writing." A writing system designed for a conlang (or even a natlang). A neography can also be designed to stand on its own (without a conlang) as an artistic exercise.

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Now for a look at some specific conlangs, the category they fall into, who created them and, just as importantly, why.

¹⁵ Language Creation Society, <https://conlang.org/>

Esperantoland may not exist on the map, but it is very real to the Esperantist community. Esperanto, an auxlang, is likely the most successful invented language that is known to exist. The most conservative estimate for speakers of Esperanto is fifty-thousand, while the least conservative is two million.¹⁶ Esperanto also may be the only conlang that has native speakers. In *Conlanging: The Art of Crafting Tongues* Lana Shlafer and her father Alex Shlafer provide personal insight into what Esperanto means to them.

Alex grew up in the former Soviet Union and his discovery of Esperanto allowed him to learn about the outside world while living under a government that tightly regulated what information was available. According to Alex “Mastering Esperanto opened up the world to me. The Iron Curtain still existed but I started reading magazines and other materials in Esperanto coming from countries friendly, or in view of the Soviet government unfriendly, and this made the picture of the world that I had [...] more nuanced.”¹⁷ Given how important the language was to him, he wanted to share it with his children.

Lana grew up speaking Russian and Esperanto and was unaware that her father could speak Russian until she was about 6 years old. She recalls an incident where she was struggling to find a word in Esperanto but kept resorting to Russian: “I’m crying because I can’t find a word in Esperanto, and he kept saying “Mi no komprenas, mi no komprenas,” I kept saying it in Russian but he was pretending not to understand. And so my mom was like “you’re torturing the children, stop it!”¹⁸ This deception aside, Lana feels that speaking Esperanto has been a great help to her. She says “I feel like Esperanto was as good of an opportunity to have true, authentic and intimate communication unshaded by culture and politics.” According to her it brings

¹⁶ Okrent pg. 301

¹⁷ Watkins

¹⁸ Ibid

people together with the purpose of communicating and sharing what they have in common rather than what makes them different. The creator of Esperanto, L. L. Zamenhof would be pleased.

Esperanto was created as a heartfelt attempt to unite humanity through a common tongue. Zamenhof, was disturbed by unrest in Europe as each sovereign nation began developing strong national identities, often connected with the dominant language in each nation.¹⁹ Although he worked on his project of peace throughout his life, even having to recreate his notes from memory after his disapproving father burned the original 600 pages, Esperanto was officially “born” in 1887. According to Okrent, Zamenhof, who spoke Russian and had no formal linguistic training and formed his language from an “accidental insight:” He noticed “the formation of the (Russian) word *shveytsarskaya* (porter’s lodge)...and the word *kondityerskaya* (confectioner’s shop). This *-skaya* interested me...suffixes provide the possibility of making from one word a number of others which don’t have to be learned separately.”²⁰ Once he began studying English, which has fewer grammatical markers in it than Russian, he removed those markers he deemed unnecessary.

Although the lexicon of Esperanto has broadened over the years, the grammar has remained more or less the same. “Words are formed from roots and affixes. Nouns end in *-o*, adjectives in *-a*, adverbs in *-e*.” Additional affixes expand the words further with *-in* indicating feminine, diminutives with *-et*, and the opposing meaning of a word is indicated by the prefix *mal-*. Verbs are created with a series of suffixes that indicate tense. For example, infinitives are indicated with the suffix *-i*. To cook would be written *kuir-i*. A place where one does cooking would be indicated by *kuir* plus a suffix indicated the word refers to a location (*-ej*) and the noun

¹⁹ Okrent pg 96

²⁰ Ibid

endings: *-o*. Kitchen then is *kuir-ej-o*. This made the language fairly easy to acquire as vocabulary could be built rapidly.²¹

Zamenhof and his wife distributed the grammars and dictionaries for free. It is generally agreed that Zamenhoff was of the opinion that something like a language could not be the property of any one person or entity. Another reflection of how humble he was regarding his creation. Perhaps this is why his efforts have endured far better than others; he really wanted to make the world better.

The other and probably more well-known type of conlang is the artlang. These languages are invented as works of art, able to stand on their own but not intended to be widely spoken. Many, although not necessarily most, of these languages are intended for use in sci-fi and fantasy such as the languages created for *Game of Thrones* and *Star Trek*. A fictional language that sounds credible provides a richer experience for fans. Even languages that are constructed from existing languages such as the Belter Creole of *The Expanse* still have to be carefully crafted to lend an air of authenticity and require the skills of linguists and other professionals.²² (Note: Tolkien's languages are technically artlangs however he did not create them for use in his books. He created the stories to allow those languages to have a home). Creating a functioning language has come to be considered an essential part of "world building" because while gibberish may work for a couple of words here and there but if you need a whole race of tough warriors who fiercely uphold their honor it better sound real; So Klingon was born in 1984.

Marc Okrand was asked to create a plausible Klingon language for *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*. Klingon has a special place in my heart because it was the first invented

²¹ Okrent 100-101

²² Dreyfus. "Developed by linguist Nick Farmer, with input from accent coach Eric Armstrong. [...] composed mainly of Chinese, Japanese, Slavic, Germanic, and romance languages because Earth's most common tongues would be the ones to survive to form the new brogue of the cosmos."

language that I knew existed in spoken form and I grew up watching the original *Star Trek* series. Also, that someone could have a job creating a language with the structure required to function as if it were a living language and then have actors give it a voice sounded both interesting and impressive. Okrand created Klingon to sound as alien as possible, while still being manageable for performers. He ended up with the task very much by chance while visiting a friend who was working on the Paramount studio lot. His friend introduced him to a passing colleague who, upon finding out he was a linguist, asked him if he could create a conversation in Vulcan for the upcoming *Star Trek II*. When they decided they needed an entire language for the Klingons as well, he was first on the list. (Note: James Doohan created the first Klingon and Vulcan words for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* in 1979. The studio required Okrand to incorporate them into the “official” Klingon vocabulary).²³

Okrand describes the phonology of Klingon by saying: “The alien character of Klingon doesn’t stem so much from the sounds it uses as from the way it violates the rules of co-occurring sounds. There’s nothing extraordinary about the sounds from a linguistic standpoint. You just wouldn’t expect to find them all in the same language.”²⁴

Okrand has a PhD in linguistics and crafted Klingon with great care using the Object-Verb-Subject word order, the least common word order among evidenced natural languages, and then creating what Okrent compares to languages such as Hungarian or Finnish. Words are built “by affixing units that have grammatical meanings to roots, one after the other...(creating) phrases can be expressed in single words. There are numerous Klingon proverbs quoted in Okrent’s book but she diagrams this one as an example: “*Dubotchugh ylpummoH*” – “If it is in your way knock it down.”

²³ Watkins

²⁴ Okrent pg 266

Du	bot	chugh yl	pum	moh
It	you	if imperative	fall	cause
“If it blocks you, cause it to fall.” ²⁵				

If you have followed Star Trek through the years, you have no doubt seen a Klingon bird of prey “decloak” and enter a battle either with or against the United Federation of Planets. In these high-stress situations, the actors use what Okrand calls “clipped Klingon,” which would be used “in military contexts where quick – rather than eloquent – communication is deemed a virtue.”²⁶ Below I have noted some examples from Section 7.1, in Okrand’s dictionary.

Proper Klingon: ylbaH – (Fire the torpedos)!

Clipped Klingon: baH – (Fire) (torpedos, rockets, missiles, etc).

Proper Klingon: wly ylcha’ – (Show the tactical display)!

Clipped Klingon: wly cha’ – (Tactical display) (show, project)

Clipped Klingon is achieved by dropping redundant affixes, such as the prefix yl–, which indicates the imperative or command form of the verb. When in battle, even one syllable can make a difference between victory and an honorable death. However, if the Klingon Home World were real, we would no doubt hear “clipped Klingon” used in other areas of daily life. Klingons don’t appear to be fond of small talk. Lt. Comdr. Worf of *The Next Generation* has demonstrated this sentiment often when expressing his aversion to diplomatic events, social gatherings, and other official occasions. Perhaps this is why there isn’t really a way to say hello. The typical Klingon greeting would be *nuqneH* or literally “What do you want?”

Despite being the language of a fictional species that puts sounds together in a not so natural way in order to achieve such a distinctive guttural sound, Klingon has developed a loyal following. There is a Klingon Language Institute (<https://www.kli.org/>) where you can take

²⁵ Ibid pg 268

²⁶ Okrand pg 72 - 74

lessons on-line and keep up with annual gatherings (qep'a') of Klingon Speakers. While the statistics may not match those of Esperanto in terms of number of speakers, the KLI has a link to a Klingon Language Wiki that has links to articles in five different languages. No doubt the enduring popularity of the Star Trek franchise has helped popularize Klingon and those among us who are unabashed sci-fi nerds have yet another means to escape the mundanity of the everyday world.

How do actors feel about having to learn an invented tongue? Wouldn't it be easier to just put on an accent while making up some words or dig up a language that is either dead or not well known? Regarding the second question, hijacking someone's language is basically cultural appropriation, some might even say theft. "We would literally be stealing a culture and applying it to another."²⁷ As for the first question, Jason Mamoia felt that being able to perform the part of Khal Drogo in *Game of Thrones* in the invented tongue of Dothraki was the key to an authentic performance. According to Mamoia, he could not have given nearly as powerful and passionate a feel to the character had he spoken the same dialogue English. Clips of both the produced show and him rehearsing make this easy to understand. He makes the language, the character, and the fictional culture feel solid and real.²⁸

So far we have examined conlangs from the point of view of achieving world peace, creating a space to have privacy, and making the unreal feel real. However, what about other motivations such as trying to balance the scales more evenly for a social group that has faced systemic discrimination? And what if that language allowed women to talk about menstruating joyfully?²⁹ That's exactly what Suzette Haden Elgin did.

²⁷ Windsor, PC

²⁸ Watkins

²⁹ Okrent pg 241

Elgin had several reasons for creating Láadan. A primary inspiration came when she was asked to review a book that discussed the feminist hypothesis that existing languages didn't permit women to fully express themselves.³⁰ As a former professor of linguistics, this got her thinking about what such a language might be like and connected with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that our thoughts, our point of view, is shaped by the language we speak. It provokes the question: Are women held back by the cultural slant of the languages they grow up with? Depending on the source referenced, it also seems that Elgin's exploration of Láadan was also sparked by a dash of outrage: "In the early 1980's, dismayed by the continuation of sexism in U.S. culture, Elgin began writing a Sci-Fi trilogy about a future earth where oppressed women invent a secret language for making their subversive plans for global revolution against their patriarchal masters."³¹ The failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, passed by Congress in 1972, to attain ratification in the 38 required states also spurred Elgin to write the trilogy, especially since a great deal of opposition had come from conservative women.³² "Intrigued by the idea of women as a "muted group," Elgin wondered what a language would look like if it gave women the power to speak directly to their experiences [...] Elgin stated her hypothesis was that "language is our best and most powerful resource for bringing about social change."³³ *Native Tongue*, the first installment of the trilogy, was published in 1984. She planned to give her experiment 10 years before declaring it a success or failure.

Elgin, who considered English to be at times less than honest, constructed her language to make deceit more difficult to achieve as well as make it easier to express concepts from a feminine perspective that would take much longer to explain in English. One of my personal

³⁰ Ibid pg 242

³¹ Newitz pg not available

³² Romney pg not available.

³³ Ibid

favorites is *radiidin* which means non-holiday: “a time allegedly a holiday but actually so much a burden because of work and preparations that it is a dreaded occasion.”³⁴ As my mother has always sworn that Mother’s Day is an assassination attempt against mothers everywhere the term definitely resonates with the real world for me. As for honesty, statements are always followed by a qualifier, called an evidential, indicating whether or not a statement is made from direct or indirect knowledge:

wa – I know because I perceived it myself.

wi – I know because it’s obvious to everyone.

we – I know because I perceived it in a dream

wáa – I assume it’s true because I trust the source.

waá - I assume it’s false because I don’t trust the source.

wo – I imagine it, it’s hypothetical

wóo – I have a total lack of knowledge as to whether it’s true or not.³⁵

Newitz rightly points out that the last indicator, *wóo*, would be especially useful for politicians, although I must question whether they would be willing to follow that particular grammatical rule. There is even an evidential to express that “it is true because I say so,” the qualifier *ca’e*.³⁶

It would be easy to imagine that Elgin’s calendar would have been filled with interviews with feminist organizations and publications, as well as requests for more information from women’s studies programs from universities everywhere. This was not the case. Calls came but not from the sources one might expect and this left her “bewildered”: “...women weren’t interested in it [...] In fact the only people who did call were men.”³⁷ These men, conlangers and linguists, praised her for the emotional honesty woven into Láadan. John Cowan, a Lojban³⁸ grammarian, incorporated her system of emotional markers and evidentials into his book of

³⁴ Okrent pg 244

³⁵ Ibid pg 246-247

³⁶ Newitz pg not available

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ According to Okrent, Lojban was created in 1989 by the Logical Language Group.

Lojban grammar, a copy of which he sent to her. Elgin was “utterly vexed. Here was a community of colangers, largely male, devoted to pure logic. Yet they loved her work more than feminist magazines did.”³⁹ She also doubted Cowan and the Logical Language Group motivations for including her system in their work, saying “Maybe they just think it will help them lie better.”⁴⁰ She eventually declared her experiment in undermining the patriarchy a failure.

However, Cowan insisted his motivations were very much based in emotion. “Conflicts of all kinds had always disturbed him, and he wanted [...] a way to avoid the aggressive one-upmanship he associated with everything from personal disagreements to political fulminations. He couldn’t stand the way people who are arguing often make assertions without any evidence, attacking their opponents without taking care to demonstrate why.”⁴¹

Elgin, who passed away in 2015, no doubt remained vexed with sexism in general until her last breath. All sources accessed for this essay refer to her vexation at the popularity of Klingon, a super masculine language, and her assertion from personal experience that men in the workplace persisted in being dismissive of their female colleagues. Perhaps an interesting affirmation of her opinion can be found in the difficulty I encountered attempting to find more academic sources about Láadan. Arizona State University’s online library yielded very little as did repeated internet searches utilizing a variety of search engines. A search on Amazon.com was also revealing. A search for Lojban turned up a complete grammar, music in Lojban, a Lojban flag, and a soundtrack for learning Lojban subliminally among dozens of other items. A search for Láadan yielded three dictionaries and grammars for sale ranging in price from \$1,099 to \$1980.14 USD and a Swedish musical group.

³⁹ Newitz pg not available

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

Will a truly successful universal language ever be created? Perhaps, if we manage to venture forth into the solar system and beyond, it is possible that some clever linguist may come up with something that works and humans and non-humans are willing to learn (think Galactic Standard from *Star Wars*). The more likely scenario is that if a common tongue emerges, it will emerge on its own out of necessity as the pidgins and creoles have evolved in ports of trade, diplomacy, and interaction between various communities in space as they have on earth for thousands of years, although the size of the universe likely includes species that might not even be able to make human sounds and vice versa. Even if a universal human language never takes root, I somehow doubt that will dissuade these linguistic adventurers from creating these amazing languages. I for one will pay much closer attention to the crafted languages that make some of our favorite entertainments so engaging.

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Biography

Robin Rowan is a senior undergraduate student studying Spanish at Arizona State University on-line and previously earned a BA in History from Auburn University. As a life-long science fiction fan, she has always been fascinated by the concept of conlangs. When a general requirement course in linguistics called for a final project there was no question as to what the topic would be. After the course ended, she decided to expand the project to give a greater overview of conlangs from the perspective of a non-conlanger. Robin currently resides in Alabama but has lived in Tennessee, Illinois, and California and has travelled extensively in Europe and the Middle East. After graduation Robin plans to earn her TOEFL certificate and continue her travels.