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Conlang Courses Around the Globe

Jessie Sams

Introduction

In Spring 2011, I offered a special section of our department's Topics in Linguistics course under the title "Linguistics of Invented Languages." At the time, I was not aware of any other undergraduate courses focusing on teaching students linguistics by teaching them how to construct a language, so I worked on my own to develop content and materials to teach the class. The timing felt right to be able grab students' attention for the course because the film *Avatar*, featuring Paul Frommer's Na'vi language, was still making waves, and—although I didn't realize it at the time—HBO's *Game of Thrones* would start airing in April of that semester, which featured several of David J. Peterson's conlangs, including Dothraki.

In early 2011, I reached out to Paul Frommer to see if he would be willing to speak at a student conference held at my university via Skype and was pleasantly surprised when he accepted the invitation. (By "pleasantly surprised," I really mean "completely blown away with joy" because my reaching out to him was a shot in the dark, just to see what would happen—I was a bit starstruck by him! For anyone wondering, he is an amazingly nice person and a great speaker.) While speaking with Paul prior to the student conference, he told me about Angela Carpenter's class at Wellesley College, and, at the time, that was the only other undergraduate course he was aware of that was like mine.

That first semester was so successful that I knew I wanted to offer the course again, which I did (every odd spring semester since 2011), but I also wanted to take it one step further: I wanted a course code and number dedicated to an Invented Languages course. Because academia's wheels tend to move slowly, the process of developing and proposing the new linguistics course took roughly two years. During one faculty meeting, a colleague asked if the course was a "real" linguistics course, asking what it would look like for graduate schools if they saw "Invented Languages" on a student's transcript. Thankfully, I was able to legitimize the course and its work through my students—a student from my 2011 section went on to win a Top

Scholar award for our college for her conlang grammar. After that, my colleagues gave me their full support.

In Spring 2013, the course-creation process was not quite complete, so I offered it under our Advanced Linguistics course code, and that was the fateful semester where the stars aligned, and the Language Creation Conference was held in Austin, TX, in early May, making it possible for my students to attend and even present a poster at the conference. There, I met David Peterson, who has generously been willing to visit my conlanging course every time it has been offered since. (Another amazingly nice person and great speaker in the conlanging community!)

Beginning Spring 2015, I was able to offer the course under our newly minted ENG 437 Invented Languages. Due to some university-internal shifts, the course is now LING 4337 Invented Languages, and its current course description is below:

Study of typological principles, natural language features, and connections between culture and language through the hands-on process of constructing an original language.

The course does not carry any prerequisites, so the students in my class range from beginning to advanced linguistics students. This year, we proposed a major in Linguistics, which will be offered as a concentration in the Modern Languages major, and all students pursuing that degree will be required to take LING 4337. (Conlanging for the win!) The proposal has been approved by our Board of Regents and should be officially on the books beginning Fall 2020.

While I have been teaching my Invented Languages course for nine years, it wasn't until the past few years that I became more aware of just how many other undergraduate conlang courses were being offered. One reason for my lack of awareness is that it is difficult to search for a course that goes under so many different names, including special topics courses. In my history of offering it alone, it has been offered under three course codes and titles! While trying to compile a list, I ran into these problems again and again:

- When offering the course, not everyone uses the same special topics title using terms such as *constructed languages*, *invented languages*, *conlangs*, *artificial languages*, and *language invention*.

- This is complicated even further when a specific topics title is not entered for the course in the university system (e.g. in some cases, it still just shows up as “Topics in Linguistics” or whatever the course is generically titled).
- Furthermore, some professors use conlanging as tools in non-conlang-specific courses, such as heavily incorporating aspects of conlanging into an Introduction to Linguistics or Introduction to Linguistics Anthropology course, which means these courses won’t show up at all when searching online for conlang-relevant courses.

Although I consider myself pretty good at finding information online, I struggled when attempting to compile a list of courses and could only find a handful of them even though I knew many more were out there. And so I tweeted for help and received many replies with the names of universities and professors teaching conlang courses or using aspects of conlanging to teach linguistics. You can see the original tweet with its replies here: <https://twitter.com/quothinguist/status/1264973873155620874>.

Based on the responses I received, I compiled the following list, which I have presented below in alphabetical order based on university name. Each entry contains as much information as I could find online, and some include all the following information: website(s), course title, professor, and course description. For some universities, I couldn’t find any of that information, so there is a short section of “Others reported on Twitter” following the list of universities.¹ Finally, at the end of the article, I provide links to additional resources you may find helpful if you are planning on creating or teaching your own course that incorporates aspects of conlangs and conlanging.

¹ **With your help, I can regularly update this list!** If you have any specific information to be added to the list, whether it is more information about a course provided or a course not yet included, please email me at samsj@sfasu.edu or reach out to me on Twitter (@quothinguist). The minimum information I need includes the following three items: (1) university where the course is offered, (2) course title, and (3) professor (at minimum). Of course, if you have more information, such as a course description, website, or link to a syllabus, that would be amazing to include, too.

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Bowling Green University

<http://personal.bgsu.edu/~swellsj/xenolinguistics/>

Course title: ENG 480/580 Extraterrestrial Language (offered 2001)

Professor: Sheri Wells-Jensen

Course description

This graduate/undergraduate seminar will explore what linguistics, literature, and the natural sciences have to tell us about the possible structure of a language of extraterrestrial origin and our hopes of being able to understand it.

Bucknell University

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4TF0yCk8cGTS1g2bUIZZ3BzSFU/view>

<https://www.bucknell.edu/fac-staff/heidi-lorimor>

Course title: LING 105 Linguistic Analysis: Sounds & Words (with an invented language assignments for each unit)

Professor: Heidi Lorimor

Course description

One semester of a two-semester introduction to linguistics. Topics include: phonetics, phonology, word forms, language change, language acquisition. [I've developed an [invented language assignment](#) to correspond to each of the major units (phonetics, phonology, morphology).]

Carleton College

Course title: LING 150 From Esperanto to Dothraki: The Linguistics of Invented Languages

Carnegie Mellon University

<http://tts.speech.cs.cmu.edu/11-823/>

Course title: 11-823 Conlanging: Learning about linguistics and language technologies through construction of artificial languages (offered Spring 2017)

Professors: Alan Black and Lori Levin

Course description

Students will work individually to create artificial human(oid) languages for fictional human cultures or SciFi worlds. Students will implement at least one language technology for their languages. In the course of creating the languages, students will learn about the building blocks of human language such as phones, phonemes, morphemes, and morpho-syntactic constructions including their semantics and pragmatics.

Class instruction will focus specifically on variation among human languages so that the students can make conlangs that are not just naively English-like. We will also touch on philosophical issues in philosophy of language and on real-world socio-political issues related to language policy.

Students will be required to use at least one of the following technologies: language documentation tools that are used for field linguistics and corpus annotation, automatic speech recognition, speech synthesis, morphological analysis, parsing, or machine translation.

Carnegie Mellon University (another department!)

<http://coursecatalog.web.cmu.edu/search/?P=80-284>

Course title: 80-284 Invented Languages

Course description

Language is normally something that develops and and changes organically within human communities, without much in the way of organized design or invention. Over the centuries, however, many have succumbed to what J. R. R. Tolkien called the "secret vice" of language creation. The purposes of these invented languages have been diverse. Some, like Tolkien's Elvish languages, Okrand's Klingon, and Peterson's Dothaki and Trigedasleng have been designed for artistic or entertainment purposes: they have set out to be "natural" languages within fictional worlds. Others, like Zamenhof's Esperanto, Brown's Loglan, and Elgin's Láadan have tried to address perceived inadequacies of the natural languages that their creators saw in the world around them. The of study language invention is thus both the study of a distinctive art form, and an exploration of the history of how people have thought about language in different ages and societies. In this course, we will explore the linguistic considerations involved in language invention, and the linguistic lessons of the history of invented languages, with a particular emphasis on applying these insights to our own language invention projects. Over the course of the semester, students will be expected to develop invent their own languages, and to complete various shorter assignments to supplement relevant ideas and skills. This course does not assume any background in linguistics, and is intended to accommodate both newcomers and advanced students.

Cornell University

Course title: LING 1100 How to Build a Language (first-year writing seminar)

Professor: Ed Cormany

Course description

In this course the students learn the skill of writing at the university level. Instructors offer themes for their courses within their own special area of expertise.

Iowa State University

Course title: ENGL 320X: Conlangs: The art of language construction (Topics in Linguistics Structure; topic offered in Spring 2019)

Professor: John Levis

Course description

Special topics related to the study of linguistic structure. Focus on language structure in areas not covered in detail by existing courses. Topics include field linguistics, morphology, forensic linguistics, neurolinguistics, semantics, non-English phonology, acoustic phonetics, linguistic universals, and historical linguistics.

La Trobe University

<https://www.latrobe.edu.au/students/your-course/subjects/current/lin1iml-imagining-language>

Course title: Imagining Language (offered 2020)

Professor: Lauren Gawne

Course description

In this subject students will be introduced to the essential building blocks of language: the sounds and sound systems (phonetics and phonology), how words and sentences are structured (morphology and syntax) and how we understand meaning (semantics). Employing the analytical tools of linguistics, students will begin applying them to the development of a new language of their own imagining. The inspiration will come from a range of human languages, including natural languages, but also secret languages, ritual languages (for example the Aboriginal language Damin, or Polari spoken by members of the gay community in the UK) and constructed languages from TV (e.g. Dothraki and Valyrian in *Game of Thrones*, Belter Creole in *The Expanse*), film (Na'vi from *Avatar*, and Elvish from *Lord of the Rings*) and literature (Lapine from *Watership Down* and Newspeak from *1984*).

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

<http://student.mit.edu/catalog/m24b.html>

Course title: 24.917: Conlangs: How to Construct a Language (offered in Spring 2020)

Professor: Norvin Richards

Course description:

Explores languages that have been deliberately constructed (ConLangs), including Esperanto, Klingon, and Tolkien's Elvish. Students construct their own languages while considering phenomena from a variety of languages of the world. Topics include writing systems, phonology (basic units of speech and how they combine), morphology (structure of words),

syntax (how words are put together), and semantics (the expression of meaning, and what language leaves unexpressed). Through regular assignments, students describe their constructed language in light of the topics discussed. Final assignment is a grammatical description of the new language.

The Ohio State University

<https://u.osu.edu/elsner.14/teaching/ling-3502-sample-syllabus/>

<https://linguistics.osu.edu/courses>

Course title: LING 3502 Klingon, Elvish, Dothraki: The Linguistics of Constructed Languages (recently offered in Spring 2020, Spring 2019, Fall 2018, and Spring 2018)

Professors: Julia Papke; Micha Elsner

Course description

Constructed languages like Klingon, Elvish, and Dothraki may seem like the province of ComiCon goers, but they have a long and varied intellectual history. Constructed languages require a deep understanding of both the mechanics of language and how languages relate to the cultures that they come from. This course examines the linguistic complexity of constructed languages.

Queen Mary University of London

<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/sllf/linguistics/undergraduate/modules/items/lin6203-constructing-a-language.html>

Course title: LIN6203 Constructing a Language

Professor: David Adger

Course description

From Esperanto to Klingon, from Volapuk to Elvish, from Leibniz's Universal Characteristic to Peterson's Dothraki, humans have made up artificial languages to support political, philosophical, and creative ends. This course examines examples of such artificial languages and their relation to natural language systems, and allows you to create a constructed language of your own, with a strong focus on systematic linguistic structure: phonological, morphological and syntactic systems as well as systems of lexical semantics and historical change. It will require you to bring together all your knowledge of linguistic structures as you make up your own language.

Southern Illinois University

Course titles:

- LING 302 From Esperanto to Dothraki: The Linguistic Reality of Invented Languages (offered Spring 2017 and 2019)
- LING 440/540 Invented Languages and Fictional Worlds (offered Spring 2015)

Professor: Jeffrey Punske

Course descriptions

(LING 302) Elective course in Linguistics without any prerequisite requirements. Focus is on linguistic typology through the lens of language invention.

(LING 440/540) Cross-listed course enrolled by graduate students and all levels of undergraduate students, focusing on the connections between constructed languages and natural occurring human languages and on fictional representations of language and linguistics.

Stephen F. Austin State University

http://catalog.sfasu.edu/preview_course_nopop.php?catoid=1&coid=1700

<https://orion.sfasu.edu/courseinformation/syl/201902/ENG4371.pdf>

Course title: LING 4337 Invented Languages (used to be ENG 437)

Professor: Jessie Sams

Course description

Study of typological principles, natural language features, and connections between culture and language through the hands-on process of constructing an original language.

Truman State University

Professor: Doug Ball

Doug teaches an upper-level course, with mostly LING majors and minors in the course.

University of Alaska Fairbanks

<https://news.uaf.edu/new-language-developed-in-uaf-linguistics-course/>

Course title: Klingon, Elvish, and Dothraki: The Art and Science of Language Creation (offered (Spring 2017)

Professor: Robin Shoaps

University of Alberta

<https://www.ualberta.ca/linguistics/news/2014/march/3specialtopicscoursesofferedthisfall2014.html>

Course title: LING 399-A4 Languages of Tolkien (special topics course offered in Spring 2014)
Professors: Antti Arppe and Benjamin Tucker

Course description

Introduction to linguistics using the languages of Tolkien's literary works as the basis for understanding core linguistic concepts and phenomena as well as learning the fundamentals of linguistic analysis, covering phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. In addition, the course will touch upon topics particular to Tolkien's languages such as historical linguistics and language change, linguistic typology and writing systems.

University of Arizona

Professor: Amy Fountain (*incorporates aspects of conlanging into introductory linguistics courses*)

Professor: Natasha Warner (*teaches a course focusing on Klingon*)

University of British Columbia Okanagan

<http://blog.wennergren.org/2014/08/interview-christine-schreyer-and-the-linguistics-of-kryptonian/>

Course title: ANTH 170 Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology
Professor: Christine Schreyer

Course description

Exploration of human communication, both verbal and non-verbal. The structure, cognitive role, and social functions of the spoken languages of the world will be emphasized.

University of California Berkeley

<https://news.berkeley.edu/2017/04/21/dotraki-developer-invented-language-leader-to-teach-summer-class/>

http://www.artoflanguageinvention.com/papers/ling183_syllabus.pdf

Course title: LING 183 The Linguistics of *Game of Thrones* and the Art of Language Invention (taught Summer 2017)
Professor: David J. Peterson

Course description

This is a college level introduction to language creation (conlanging) and language study. Language creation lies somewhere between the realms of art and science, drawing heavily on both. Students will acquire the fundamentals of the scientific study of language, and will be encouraged to take that information and employ it creatively in the field of conlanging. This course will feature in class lectures, group discussion, classroom activities, and at home study.

University of California San Diego

Course title: Linguistics of Invented Languages, How to Create a Language (*freshman seminar*)

Professor: Grant Goodall

University of California Santa Cruz

<https://catalog.ucsc.edu/Current/General-Catalog/Courses/LING-Linguistics/Lower-Division/LING-80K>

Course title: LING 80K Invented Languages from Elvish to Esperanto

Professor: Pranav Anand

Course description

Considers invented languages, including Elvish and Klingon, as well as lesser-known ones that tackle ethical, social, or cognitive concerns. Students learn tools from contemporary linguistics to analyze language structures and understand how they relate to creator intentions.

[*This course was also taught earlier under a slightly different name and under a different instructor.*]

<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/klingon-dothraki-understanding-invented-languages>

Course title: Constructed Languages from Elvish to Esperanto (offered in 2017)

Professor: Nick Kalivoda

University of Kansas

Course title: ANTH/LING 430 Constructed Languages

Professor: Arienne Dwyer

Course description

The study of language as a symbolic system. Exploration into the interrelatedness of linguistic systems, of nonlinguistic communicative systems, and of other cultural systems. (Same as ANTH 430.)

The University of Sheffield

<https://school-of-english.dept.shef.ac.uk/modules/2017/ell364/>

Course title: ELL364 Constructed Languages

Professor: Robyn Orfitelli

Course description

This module builds on theories learned in Level 1 and 2 ELL and Language and Literature modules, applying them to the constructed languages ('conlangs') created specifically for books, television, and film. Topics covered will include the grammatical patterns underlying the sound and structural systems of conlangs, the similarities and differences between conlangs and 'natural' human languages, the representation of historical change in conlangs, and the textual use and representation of conlangs in literature.

University of South Carolina-Columbia

Course title: *special topics course*

Professor: Scott Brewer

University of Texas-Arlington

<https://catalog.uta.edu/coursedescriptions/ling/>

Course title: LING 2321 Constructed Languages

Course description

This course is an introduction to constructed languages. Presentation, examination, and analysis of constructed languages, such as Esperanto, Klingon, Dothraki, and many others.

University of Toronto

<https://fas.calendar.utoronto.ca/course/lin402h1>

Course title: LIN 402 Linguistic Typology and Constructed Languages

Professor: Nathan Sanders

Course description

This course uses constructed languages (e.g., Esperanto, Klingon, Dothraki) to explore crosslinguistic patterns in language structure. Topics include phonological and morphosyntactic typology, language change over time, effects of culture and environment on language, history of language construction, standards in writing descriptive grammars, and critical analysis of research on language diversity.

University of Tübingen

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160801142316/http://www.sfs.uni-tuebingen.de:80/~abuch/16ss/conlang.html>

Course title: Kunst- und Plansprachen - von Esperanto bis Dothraki (offered in 2016)

Professor: Armin Buch

Course description

Der Untersuchungsgegenstand der Linguistik sind zunächst die tatsächlich existierenden, natürlichen Sprachen. In diesem Seminar erweitern wir ihn um Kunst- und Plansprachen, also um erfundene Sprachen. Das Erfinden von Sprachen lotet die Grenzen dessen, was eine Sprache ist und sein kann, aus, und schärft damit die Definition des Begriffes an sich. Auch spielen konstruierte Sprachen eine Rolle in der Forschung (kontrollierte Korpora, Spracherwerbsexperimente). Im Untertitel nenne ich Esperanto stellvertretend für konstruierte Welthilfssprachen, und Dothraki für fiktive Sprachen, die beiden häufigsten Unterarten von Plansprachen.

Themen des Seminars sind: Sammeln und Klassifizieren von Plansprachen, Gründe für und angewandte Methoden bei ihrer Konstruktion, Grenzen des Begriffes "Sprache", sprachliche Vielfalt und Universalien, geplanter und spontaner Sprachwandel, die Einarbeitung in und Vorstellung von einer selbstgewählten Plansprache.

Sprachpolitische und soziolinguistische Aspekte bleiben außen vor: Dies ist kein Kurs über "Interlinguistik", "internationale Kommunikation" oder Sprachkontakt.

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

Professor: James A. Berry

Washington University

<https://artsci.wustl.edu/first-year-seminars>

Course title: The Linguistics of Constructed Languages (*first-year seminar*)

Professor:

Course description

This course explores the design of and motivation for constructed languages from a modern linguistic point of view. Constructed languages are those that are the result of some conscious and deliberate design rather than ones occurring naturally.

Wellesley College

Course title: LING 315 Invented Languages: Wilkins to Navi

Professor: Angela Carpenter

Course description

Over the centuries, invented, or artificial, languages have been devised for many reasons, including a desire to improve existing languages, an effort to unite the world, or a need to explore how languages are learned. The vast majority have failed, but why? Is there a place for invented language? What do invented languages teach us about natural language? We will look at invented languages from a variety of points of view: linguistic, historical, philosophical, psychological, and sociological. We will explore the linguistic underpinnings of various languages, from seventeenth century Real Character to Na'vi, with a look at a successful "reinvented" language, Modern Hebrew. Students will design their own miniature artificial language.

Western Washington University

Course title: ANTH 247 Introduction to Linguistics Anthropology

Professor: Judy Pine

Course description

The study of language from an anthropological perspective. Includes an introduction to the structure and patterning of language, the study of language as it is used in daily life, and the role of language in human evolution.

Wichita State University

Professor: Mythili Menon

Others reported on Twitter

I requested help in compiling a list of universities that offer conlang courses on Twitter, and the following universities were included in replies to the tweet, but I cannot find any information online for their courses.

Metro State University, Denver

Monash University

University of California Los Angeles

University of Pittsburgh (*this may be cross-listed with Carnegie Mellon's course*)

More resources

If you are interested in more information and resources available on conlanging in the classroom, I encourage you to check out these resources:

Conlangery #138: Jessie Sams and Conlangs in the Classroom”

<https://conlangery.com/2019/04/conlangery-138-jesse-sams-and-conlangs-in-the-classroom/>

Panel on Teaching Linguistics with Invented Languages at LSA in 2017

<https://sites.google.com/a/email.arizona.edu/lsa2017-invented-languages/>

“Constructed Languages in the Classroom” by Nathan Sanders

https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/02e_92.3Sanders.pdf

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