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A Discovery of Conlangs and Conlangers: A personal history

by Jessie Sams

I haven't lived there in over two decades, yet *home* for me is rural Missouri at the northern boundary of the Ozark Highlands region, where large oak trees dominate hilly, lush green forests. An area of immense natural beauty, creeks and caves hide in the woods among underbrush growing so tightly together it creates seas of green. It's also an area of cruel weather with springs being notorious for thunderstorms and tornadoes, summers bringing heat and high humidity, and winters biting the landscape with freezing temperatures and ice storms. Falls, though, cover the hills with bright jewel-tone colors of changing leaves and offer some of the most beautiful views and weather I've ever experienced.

Nestled in those wooded hills is a house I called home for all but a few months of my childhood and young adult life. After my dad finished building the first stage of our house when I was only a few months old, we moved from a small town of just over 2,000 residents to our country home, where the houses of even the nearest neighbors were completely hidden behind intertwined trees. The first stage of our home was a basement house built into the side of a hill, so driving up to the house offered only a view of a roof sitting atop the ground. Three years later, my dad built on and added the main, above-ground level.

My sister and I played outside most days, often in our front lawn (as pictured here). The woods surrounding our house—ever advancing to reclaim the edges of the lawn as its own—inspired a lot of daydreams and play a large role in the setting for my first full conlang.

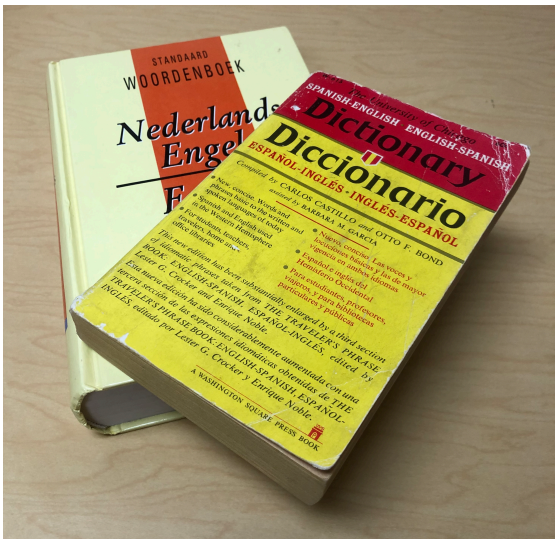
We spent a lot of time outdoors. Every fall, my family took to the woods, chopping, tossing, and stacking the stockpiles of wood that kept our house heated for the winter months. In springs, we worked together in our garden, growing vegetables that were canned and pickled during summer months, and we also worked in the gardens belonging to other people, helping them plant and then later harvest crops that were divvied up and shared. During the summers, we picked blackberries from their thorny bushes and made everything from cobblers to jellies to wine with the berries. We grew most of the vegetables we ate, and my dad fished and hunted for most of our meat. We tried growing fruit trees, too, but the squirrels always ate the fruit off the trees just before it was ripe enough to pick.

The nearest town was the largest in the county—and boasted the county's only Wal-Mart—with just under 2,300 people. It was a big celebration when the town's first stop light was installed at the intersection of Main Street and Highway 28 and an even bigger celebration when the first fast food restaurant opened its doors in our small town. Movies, malls, and other "big" businesses were at least a 45-minute drive away on country highways, so we rarely (if ever) went to one destination in a city at a time. Every time we visited the Jefferson City mall (about an hour's drive), our parents turned it into a full-day trip with lunch at a Chinese restaurant, trips to multiple stores, and a customary stop at Gerb's, a large grocery store, for all the "fancy" food items the local IGA (which later turned into a Piggly Wiggly), Ramey's, and Save-a-Lot didn't stock.

Because we lived outside of town, our phone number was long-distance for pretty much everyone I knew and went to school with. With long-distance phone calls costing more money in those days, we didn't make or receive them very often, so communication with friends was typically limited to in-person interactions. Convinced TV and video games would rot our brains, our parents didn't allow us to have any video games in the house, and our TV-viewing habits were limited to 30 minutes a day on standard broadcasting channels (we didn't have cable and didn't know internet existed). My sister and I cheated on Saturdays by waking up early and watching as many Saturday morning cartoons and shows as we could between the 6:00 a.m. start of TV shows and our parents waking up. In the third grade, my favorite Saturday morning show was *Saved By the Bell*. If you have ever seen the show, you may remember that Zach had a cordless phone he would pull out of his backpack to make calls in several episodes. When I saw Zach's phone as a kid, I thought it was a pretend phone—I didn't understand he was actually making calls because I had never seen or heard of a cellular phone. It wasn't until *much* later in

life when I made the connection that Zach's phone was real and that cell phones were available in the late '80s and early '90s.

All that is to say, we were fairly isolated in our country home. As much as I loved it there, I had grand dreams—dreams of living in a big city, traveling abroad, learning other languages, working in a fast-paced business world or high-fashion art world. At ten years old, I announced I wanted to speak another language, so my mom gave me her Spanish dictionary from her college days, and my dad brought home a Spanish textbook from the high school Spanish teacher. Not understanding how languages worked and having only been exposed to English, I erroneously thought learning Spanish would be as easy as learning vocabulary and plugging words into sentences. The opening pages of the first chapter describing the differences between *el* and *la* confused me enough to stall my studies, and any words I learned during my short stint with the textbook were pronounced in ways that would have been largely (if not entirely) unrecognizable for Spanish speakers.



My earliest language dictionaries inspired a love for words in other languages. The Spanish dictionary was a cherished gift from my mom—one of two dictionaries she gave me from her college days to continue encouraging my interest in language.

A few years after I gave up on teaching myself Spanish, my sister talked my mom into letting us have a cat, who happened to be orange. I decided his name should be a shortened version of the word for "orange" in Spanish and named him Ranja, pronounced [randʒə]—an example of how I assumed all the rules of English while trying to learn Spanish. My mom tried to explain that I was saying it wrong, but I refused to listen. After all, there was a *j* in the word, and I knew how to pronounce anything spelled with a *j*, thank you very much.

When I was in elementary and middle school, I was involved in a program called SEEK, which was an acronym, but I can't begin to remember what it stood for. We met twice a week during the school day, and our teacher, Mr. Mueller, provided a variety of academic experiences for us—dissecting animals, building model covered wagons from the Oregon Trail journey to scale, competing in bridge-building contests with toothpicks and glue as our only tools, testing unknown substances to identify their chemical properties, completing logic puzzles… Most importantly for this story, though, he gave us two activities in particular that sparked my interest in languages again: one required us to crack coded messages and another asked us translate a passage written in Esperanto.

We tackled the decoding exercise in fifth grade, and the activity included several types of language codes, including substitution-based ciphers and a scrambled-word code. The scrambled-word code mixed around letters in English words but only in ways that were pronounceable in English so the code could be spoken aloud as well as written. That activity inspired me to create my own language using the same scrambled-word principles. I crafted messages like

> Lehol, ym enam si Esjis.
> Od uyo twan ot relan ym gulanega thwi em?

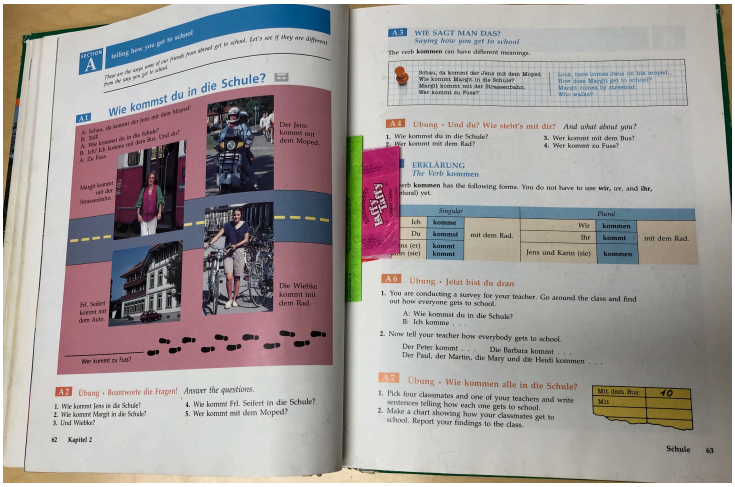
I invested quite a bit of time into that code, filling a Trapper Keeper with pages of vocabulary lists and even lesson plans for teaching my friends this new "language" called Elhings. Or maybe it was Gleshin… Sadly, my notes no longer survive. None of my friends were excited about my new language, and the project eventually fell by the wayside.

When Mr. Mueller gave us an Esperanto-translation exercise in the eighth grade, I was hooked. I asked him for more Esperanto materials because the language fascinated me. He gave me what information he had, which included a small glossary and additional pages written in the language. Taking the materials home, I happily shut myself in my bedroom and translated each page. Once I was finished, though, I had no idea how to find more about the language, so my interest in Esperanto faded away, joining my dreams of teaching myself to speak Spanish.

In the summer of 1995, our dad took my sister and me to Belgium, where my sister and I stayed with an amazing Belgian family as our dad toured western Europe, coaching a baseball team in international tournaments. Experiencing daily life in another country with the Kelchterman family for those two weeks was a life-changing experience for me. It opened so

many doors to new dreams and gave me my first *real* exposure to a language other than English. I bought a Dutch-English dictionary and scoured the daily newspaper trying to learn bits of the language, but it didn't take me long to figure out that Dutch is nowhere as regular and predictable as Esperanto, nor did it follow the rules of English. While my attempts at translating Dutch using only a dictionary failed spectacularly, they also inspired me to pursue more language studies.

Our high school offered two options for language courses—two years of either Spanish or German. I happily signed up for German (a relative of Dutch!) with Mr. Hengstenberg. I couldn't understand why my classmates weren't nearly as excited as I was to recite verb conjugations: *ich bin, du bist, er ist*... Mr. Hengstenberg walked around the room with a yard stick and hit desks to wake students up, keeping time with the conjugation recitations. Those two years taught me that a language was much more than its vocabulary, and I wanted more.



Mr. Hengstenberg gifted me copies of our high school German textbooks to keep as I pursued my German studies in college. This copy came with Laffy Taffy wrappers folded, pressed, and ready to be used to create the geometric-shaped candy-wrapper bracelets that were popular in the '90s.

When I went to Truman State University, I took every chance I could to study languages: a year of Latin, more German, a semester of ASL. I discovered linguistics a bit accidentally when I took an introduction to linguistics course as a requirement for my newly declared German major during the spring semester of my freshman year. Within two weeks, I changed my major yet again, opting for linguistics. My brief time in Belgium had inspired me to study abroad, so I pursued an opportunity to spend my junior year in Germany through the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) and was accepted for the program at Universität Trier (where I ended up studying Mandarin Chinese and Arabic!). I was enamored with languages and finally had the opportunity to learn more about them.

Two movies that were released in 2001—the same year I began my studies in Germany—brought a different language interest back to the forefront of my mind. Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* may not have very much in common, but what they do have in common is a very important part of this story. They both feature conlangs. I am a bit embarrassed to admit to fellow conlangers in my age group that my introduction to Elvish was through Peter Jackson's movie because I had never read Tolkien's books before then (and wouldn't read them for another 8 or 9 years). Those opening scenes of the movie when Cate Blanchett quietly recited Elvish hooked me.

I didn't know what to do with my reignited interest in conlangs, though. I collected what resources I could find on Atlantean and Tolkien languages and copied notes in their scripts, but I remembered my failed "Nilgesh" experiment and didn't know how or even why to move forward with my interest. My imagination was lacking, and life kept coming at me full force. Six more years flew by. Those six years brought many life changes—college graduation, graduate school, three cross-country moves, a baby, a husband, multiple adjuncting jobs…

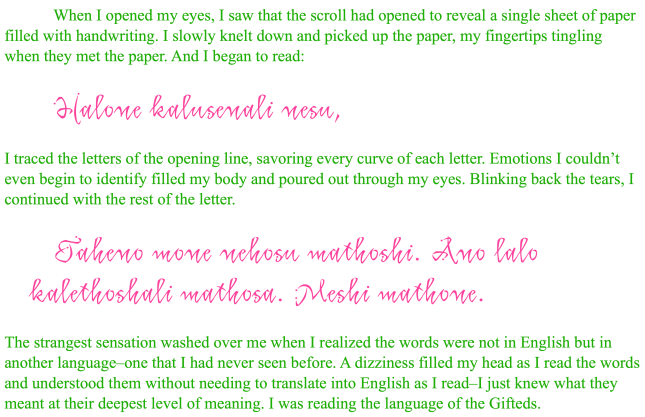
Many of my childhood dreams were coming true as I traveled and moved and experienced new things, but one thing remained the same. I still didn't have a grasp on technology or the internet and the information and communities online technology offered. It wasn't even until my senior year of college that I first used a digital card catalog in the library (some days I still miss the old paper cards in wooden drawers), bought a cell phone (I needed one as a safety measure for a massive 3,000-mile road trip my roommate and I planned), and started regularly checking my email (I was applying for graduate schools and had to use email for contact information). My analog childhood hadn't prepared me for the digital age.

In 2007, I was living in Buffalo, New York, working on my dissertation and teaching English composition courses at local colleges—and desperately in need of a creative outlet to save my sanity. While visiting my friend Sarah in Washington, D.C., she took me to see the movie *Stardust*, and that night I had the weirdest but most wonderful dream. The jumbled images from my dream needled at my brain during my waking hours until a fuller, cohesive storyline came together, and I had a full-fledged idea for a young adult novel. And this story of mine needed a constructed language, a language that I would eventually name Hiutsath.

I started with the story and worked on the novel side of the project before tackling the language, building up the world and an understanding of the speakers to aid in sketching out the language they would speak. As an outlet for me, the language brought together all my favorite parts of studying linguistics while not constraining me to reality. I knowingly violated many

natural language norms because I liked the way something sounded or looked or patterned. This language was my escape from dense, academic writing and theoretical research, and I delighted in making some aspects of my language wonderfully unnatural.

One of the more soothing unnatural features of the language for me was the lack of irregularities—Hiutsath is entirely regular, which fits with the storyline that its speakers stubbornly resist any type of change, viewing irregularities and change as evil (and are magical beings who can maintain this kind of changeless existence). Their resistance to change crystalized the language's forms, so there is no distinction between proto- and modern forms. Hiutsath was my very own Esperanto for a world created in a jumbled dream. Perhaps the language reflected my own struggles with keeping up with a life that was constantly shifting and changing around me.



When I opened my eyes, I saw that the scroll had opened to reveal a single sheet of paper filled with handwriting. I slowly knelt down and picked up the paper, my fingertips tingling when they met the paper. And I began to read:

Halone kalusenali nesu,

I traced the letters of the opening line, savoring every curve of each letter. Emotions I couldn't even begin to identify filled my body and poured out through my eyes. Blinking back the tears, I continued with the rest of the letter.

Taheno mone nehosu mathoshi. Ano lalo kalethoshali mathosa. Neshi mathone.

The strangest sensation washed over me when I realized the words were not in English but in another language–one that I had never seen before. A dizziness filled my head as I read the words and understood them without needing to translate into English as I read–I just knew what they meant at their deepest level of meaning. I was reading the language of the Gifteds.

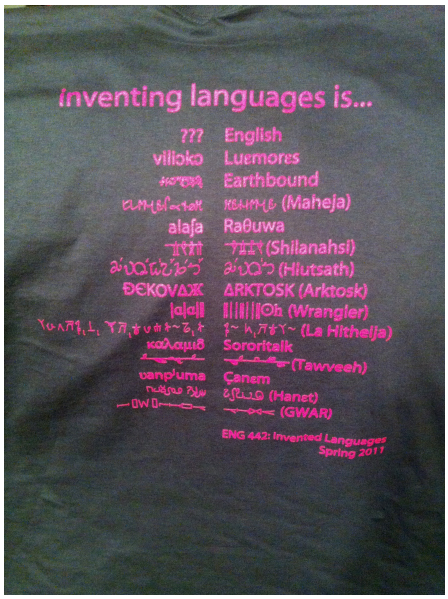
By no means my best conlang, Hiutsath remains the conlang that feels most like me. This image is from a page in the young adult novel I wrote that incorporates Hiutsath and its speakers into the story. (I added color to help the text-based image stand out from the rest of this essay.)

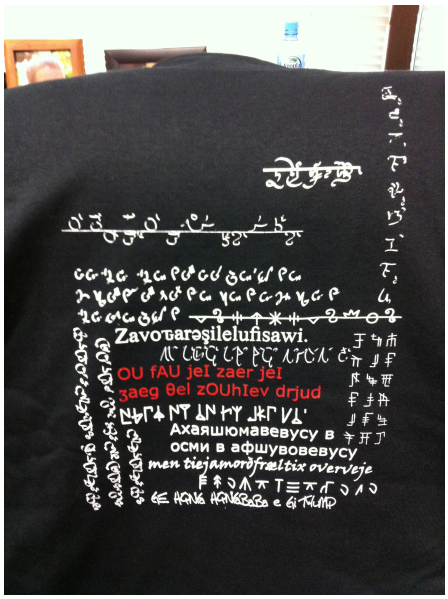
Not only was conlanging my creative outlet, I felt certain I was the sole everyday, average person creating languages for fun. The only conlangs I was aware of at that time were Esperanto, Atlantean, all the Tolkien languages, and Klingon, so I felt I must be adding something new to the world by turning conlanging into a personal hobby. I had no idea there were thriving, growing conlang communities beyond the realms of Esperanto and Klingon.

My childhood led me to being a private person. To this day, my preference continues to be in-person communication, and it gives me a weird sort of pain to share news about myself or my work publicly. When I have something important to say, there is a small circle of people in my life I think to share it with, and it doesn't occur to me to seek out people I don't know to expand my community. One positive side of that introvertedness is that, when I openly spoke about my conlang project with my very small community of family and friends in 2008, they

accepted it without hesitation. They even found it cool (or, at the very least, claimed they did) and served as sounding boards for my project. While my naïveté toward online communities may have hampered my ability to connect with fellow conlangers and hone my conlanging craft in those early days, it also sheltered me from the judgment and downright meanness of the haters.

In late 2010, I came up with a brilliant way to bring my conlanging hobby to the classroom: I decided to teach a course where students create their own languages as a way of introducing them to linguistics and features of natural languages. All the materials I pooled for that Spring 2011 course were based on introductory linguistic lessons and typology to teach students patterns of features found in language. While preparing for the course, I encountered the word "conlang" for the first time (prior to that, I had only referred to them as "invented languages").





The first two times I taught the conlang course, my students and I designed class t-shirts.

The movie *Avatar* had made quite a splash the previous year and was a topic at the forefront of many class discussions during the 2011 spring semester, so, on a whim, I emailed Paul Frommer to see if he would be interested in speaking with my students when prepping for the second offering of the course in Spring 2013. Being the lovely human being he is, Paul agreed, giving a lecture and spending several hours on Skype with a large group of students who peppered him with questions about Na'vi and conlangs. When he put me in contact with Angela Carpenter, who was teaching a similar class at Wellesley, I thought we were the only two professors in existence who had thought to do such a novel thing—teaching a conlang course that required students to create their own languages.

Had I not started teaching a conlanging course in 2011 and had I not offered it again in 2013, I may never have discovered a larger community of conlangers. While researching new materials for teaching the course in 2013, I found the Zompist Board and Mark Rosenfelder's *Language Construction Kit*. During the Spring 2013 semester, quite by accident, I stumbled across a website for an organization called the Language Creation Society and found out those wonderful people were holding a conference that very semester in Austin, which was only a five-hour drive away from my house. I immediately submitted an abstract for that conference and signed up to participate in the Conlang Relay, where I was placed second in the relay after none other than David J. Peterson, who I knew about because of the newly and wildly popular *Game of Thrones*. Before receiving the relay text, I was already star struck (the creator of Dothraki was sending me a text to translate?!) and had no clue what I was getting myself into with that relay. Translating the Dothraki text left me thinking, "Screaming goats? Where did I go wrong with this?" It turns out that some conlangers like to have fun when creating relay texts…

2. Hiutsaθ Text

Text

"laʃetaiθo paθanesu"

xefiloθnesu θexoma, leθelunei θexosu. lofaθnesau xaθanema θesasu neʃilessauaʃ ɸesta amosŋehaθ esisola. ɲuexoano laʃetaiθoma esi θesuɸis, kietsuʃo neʃisau. ŋei xeeleθosu moneθelunema kie xatsaθeto melo taxaolihoma. ŋai pepaoʃθamoata taxaolihoma, leθoʃasataaʃ nexilama θesasu. xekomaʃsu malaɸiθma ʃenasθaamo kie xakaθito mona sulo hapaθhaθ, kiemeɲi maθoto alume menalef ispole somoneθo. axixaftsasa alume malaɸiθma ala, peaxixaftsasauaʃ islu. ŋei xeiŋessu soutsima ɲamonutsi taɸihama kie ɲuemalato mona malaɸiθma hamilaθaamo. maθoata taɸihaho ala faeθe θesasu. ŋaheɸθasata θesuma, nexilamaaʃ θesasu, haoxaθaneaʃ θesasu. maθoata taɸihaho ispole ala eθafahotsuteɸ soispole. ʃiaŋesoaʃ θesuma ulefsiɸestosoaʃ θesuma, kieule ulefʃinasu somoneθo taɸihama kie ɲuemalato mona malaɸiθma hamilaθaamo. tsaθexo tsaθŋeiθoma esi θesuɸis, leθelunei θexosu: oŋeftsuso θesuma. ŋei xeiŋessu ɲamonutsi taɸihama kie ɲuemalato mona malaɸiθma hamilaθaamo. lasetoano malaɸiθ hamilaθa seliteɸ. mifne komaʃsu malaɸiθma hamilaθaamo. malaɸiθma hamilaθaamo kipoθamo islu. laseata iaɸneteɸ! xeneʃilessu fala, leθelunei θexosu. xeneʃilessu xetsahaθesuaʃ tseθmo maapama!

One unnatural feature of Hiutsath stands out in this passage from the conlang relay: its heavy reliance on voiceless fricatives, which was an intentional decision to make it sound like a "whispered" language.

The 5th Language Creation Conference literally changed the course of my conlanging life because it's where I met David and Erin Peterson (I met Erin first and was immediately drawn to her, feeling like we had been lifelong friends within the first 10 seconds of talking to her) and a host of other amazing conlangers, including Britton Watkins, John Quijada, Sylvia Sotomayor, and Doug Ball. I can't stress this point enough: I had no idea this larger community existed until 2013 even though I had been a conlanger at heart since my "Neshgli" experiment in 1992 and a conlanger in real life since I started working on Hiutsath in 2008. I'm usually that person at conferences who drinks coffee in an isolated corner and hopes no one sees her, but that's not at

all how I felt at the LCC5. Attending that conference had me enthusiastically thinking, “These are my people!” rather frequently and inspired me to try to get more involved in conlang communities, which meant I had to get more comfortable with online communities in general.

I may have more access to technology now, but I’m still not always sure how to turn inward thoughts into outward communication, especially when I can’t see who I’m communicating with, so I sometimes struggle with forging relationships from a distance. Although it may have taken a lot of self-talk and personal bravery to reach out, taking those leaps of faith to meet and interact with other conlangers has been well worth it. Reaching out to Paul Frommer to ask him to speak to my students in 2013 led to amazing discussions with him, and he made it possible for me to virtually meet Angela Carpenter and later meet Britton Watkins in person. Inviting David Peterson to campus to speak with my students in 2015 led to an ongoing friendship and more conlang opportunities than I had ever dared to dream of—opportunities that keep coming!

Bringing my conlang course into the Twittersphere in 2019 led me to interacting with more conlangers from around the world, including Brian Bourque, Jamin Johnson, Zeke Fordsmender, Deborah Vandenberg, Joey Windsor, Kenan Kigunda, Nick Camporillo, Owen, and Margaret, all of whom graciously and actively responded to my students’ conlanging tweets. It was because of that activity on Twitter that I became aware of the Conlang Salon in Philadelphia and managed to attend what I think was their final official meeting, where I met more conlangers and finally met Jamin and Zeke in person.

In the conlang community, I have indeed found “my people.”