

Fiat Lingua

Title: Reflections on The Conlang Guide

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MS Date: 11-24-2025

FL Date: 01-01-2026

FL Number: FL-00010C-00

Citation: Peterson, David J. 2025. "Reflections on The Conlang Guide." FL-00010C-00, *Fiat Lingua*, <<https://fiatlingua.org>>. Web. 01 January 2026.

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Reflections on *The Conlang Guide*

Back in 2019, Jessie approached me with the idea of writing a joint textbook on conlanging—a textbook we'd simply offer online. I said I thought that was a fine idea, but I thought a better idea would be for Jessie to write her own textbook and have it published in a traditional fashion. Now here we are, seven years later, and Jessie has published her textbook: *The Conlang Guide*.

In the history of conlanging, there were three important moments in publishing. The first was Mark Rosenfelder's *The Language Construction Kit*, which was the first published text on language construction. The second was my own *The Art of Language Invention*, which was the first mass market text on language construction. But up to this point we lacked an actual textbook from a traditional textbook publisher. With the proliferation of conlang courses, it was going to happen eventually. But just as many conlang college courses are taught by non-conlanging linguists, so would it be likely for a conlang textbook to be written by a non-conlanging linguist. Indeed, such a text may come in the future. But the first one, published by the University of Cambridge Press, was written by a conlanger and a linguist: *The Conlang Guide* by Jessie Peterson.

While she was writing it, I read through Jessie's text and offered comments where relevant. Mostly, though, I just enjoyed it. The whole thing is laid out beautifully and clearly. Reading through it, I had to admit that while I have the knowledge required to have written this book, I didn't have the skill for it. There's a lot of conlang material in *The Art of Language Invention*, but I don't feel like it teaches you *how* to conlang the

way *The Conlang Guide* does. Only Jessie could have written this book, and I think the world is better for it.

Once it was published, and it was an actual book you could hold in your hands, I wanted to read it again as a *book book*¹, and in so doing, I decided to write down some thoughts on each chapter. Think of it as a small companion/behind-the-scenes look at *The Conlang Guide*. This book has been a major part of Jessie's life for the past half decade. It was a labor of love, though at times it was simply labor, but it was so, so worth it. The book is a joy to read, and a wonderful introduction to the art that has captivated so many of us for so long. *Tiholates!*

Chapter 1: Natlangs

For many years, Jessie taught courses not just on introductory linguistics, but also specifically on the history of English, and this chapter draws from her experience there. I think a lot of this will be review for most conlangers, but it starts the book off on solid footing. The Tok Pisin example came from the book *Contact Languages* by Mark Sebba, which was the assigned text for my course on pidgin and creole languages taught by John McWhorter at UC Berkeley in the fall of 2001. Jessie took that example from the exact book I bought back in 2001 and have carried with me ever since.

I also think the chapter title is worth noting. "Natlang" is a term that exists exclusively within the conlang community. From the very title of the first chapter any

¹ For an explanation of this usage of reduplication, see section 13.2.2 of *The Conlang Guide*.

conlanger will know that this book was written not just by a linguist, but by a conlanger.

Chapter 2: Conlangs

Often when reading Jessie's book I find myself reading things I wish I would have written in *The Art of Language Invention*. In some cases I didn't because there wasn't enough space, but in others, I simply didn't think of it, or didn't have wherewithal to pull it off. For example, I think it actually would have been even more useful in my book, which is mass market and much more likely to wind up in a non-conlanger's hands, to go through an extended demonstration of how language games differ from conlangs. I think this section is useful in helping to demonstrate why what we're doing when we conlang is interesting and worthy of more attention than something like Pig Latin.

It's always fun to go through a conlang book and learn about new conlangs. I never knew about Ruski Jezik and have no idea where Jessie found La Petro. This is a very nice, very thorough introduction to the basics of what a conlang is.

Chapter 3: Sound Inventories

Part of the reason this book is so good for beginners (and so much better than mine) is Jessie takes the time to explain things that a lot of veteran conlangers take for granted—for example, that the labels for places in an IPA chart are adjectival versions of the names of those places in a sagittal section (e.g. velar~velum). I look at it as a form of

kindness on the part of the author. Though this chapter will likely serve as background knowledge many conlangers will already possess, it is such a strong and concise resource that it's wonderful to have on hand for beginners and veterans.

This chapter also introduces us to Squirrelish. Jessie had written a fair chunk of the book, but felt like something was missing. She came to me one day with an idea she thought was completely off-the-wall and she was sure her editor wouldn't like, but for her, the idea helped her give the entire book structure. That idea was Squirrelish: a language she'd build up throughout the course of the book, adding a bit that fit with each chapter as she wrote the book. I thought it was brilliant, and it also closely mirrors what she used to do when teaching her conlang class. In that class she created a new language for each class period along with her students. Adding Squirrelish seemed quite natural, and, as you can see, her editor did *not* object. Now Squirrelish (later Okoki!) is a part of the charm of the book.

Chapter 4: Phonotactics

If there's any part of conlanging that deserves a full chapter and careful attention it is phonotactics. Basically, if the phonology of a language is its ingredients, phonotactics is its recipe. You can do *anything* with a pile of ingredients—including producing something that's completely inedible. With the same ingredients a chef can produce a masterpiece. This chapter really helps to illustrate exactly how important the phonotactics of a language are.

Every so often there is something in *The Conlang Guide* that brings me a little burst of joy. In table 4.2, *manapua* is defined as “delicious, delicious steamed bun”. The definition forces the table row to be four lines long instead of three, which the rest of the rows in that portion in the table are. Had it simply been defined as “steamed bun” it would have been three rows, but Jessie wanted you to know how delicious *manapua* are, so the table gets an entire extra row just for that. I love it.

Chapter 5: Phonological Shifts

This chapter could be a book. Learning about sound changes is always a challenge—especially right after learning about phonetics and phonology in general—but this introduction is about as good as it gets—especially for its length. The most frequent sound changes are there, rule-ordering is there, there’s absolutely no mention of the terms feeding/bleeding/counterfeeding/counterbleeding... It really has it all. This is the friendliest, clearest introduction to sound change I’ve ever seen—and it has some good stuff in it for veteran conlangers, as well.

The best thing about this book is every time I read it I’m inspired to conlang. That’s definitely the case rereading this chapter. Seeing examples of sound changes always makes me want to experiment with new ones and throw them at some data to see what happens...

Chapter 6: Basic Vocabulary

Obviously this is also a chapter that could be a book, but worldbuilding is something that I always gave short shrift—both in my conlanging, in the early days, and in *The Art of Language Invention*—so it's wonderful to see it given proper treatment here. There's also really solid advice on how to create vocabulary, which I think many conlangers will appreciate, given how often the question is asked.

Honestly, at this stage of the book, the reader has what they need to create a pretty decent naming language. No grammar yet, of course, but there is a lot of solid material to get something that phonologically coheres and works within a consistent universe. Not bad for a third of a book!

Chapter 7: Basic Grammar

This is an absolutely dynamite introduction the foundational building blocks of grammatical structure. Jessie does a lot of heavy lifting here, introducing word order, argument structure, typology, and pragmatics. This is definitely a linguistics chapter, but it's done so well that I think it's ideal for beginning conlangers. I like how Jessie draws attention not simply to the variety of grammatical structures and their typological weighting, but *why* a conlanger might choose one or the other (i.e. not simply “choose this because it's common” or “choose this to be quirky”). That gets at the artistry behind conlanging—the intentionality—and *that's* the hardest part to teach.

I also love coming across little bits of Jessie everywhere in this book, such as the examples in (7.20), where the word for woman (*dali*) comes from Dolly Parton. This book exudes Jessieness in a delightful way.

Chapter 8: Inflections and Grammaticalization

I think it was an absolute master stroke to introduce the concept of inflection and grammaticalization in the same chapter. Even in *The Art of Language Invention* I didn't dare, introducing the reader to the basic concepts of grammatical inflection in one chapter and devoting an entirely separate chapter to historical change of all types (phonological, lexical, and grammatical). For new conlangers, this essentially encourages them to think of an inflection *as* an evolutionary process from the very beginning, which, I believe, is the best way to approach it as a conlanger.

It is also my hope that in going through all these examples—seeing the detailed breakdown of Ménishè agreement, for example, and going through Squirrelish step-by-step—that the incremental process behind the historical approach will be demystified, which is important for being able to implement in whatever way a conlanger wishes. My hope is that it's empowering, rather than deflating, which I feel *The Art of Language Invention* can be at times.

Also, Jessie pulls off one of my absolute favorite linguistic magic tricks in this book in the last paragraph of section 8.1.7. I won't say what it is here (no spoilers!), but it's utter genius—and it worked on me *again* on rereading, even though I'd read it before during the drafting stage.

Chapter 9: Nouns

A thorough and well-designed introduction to the most important elements of nominal morphology: number, class, and case—and you get adpositions along with it! The examples throughout this chapter are extremely helpful—especially adpositions that can co-occur with different cases. It's also a much gentler introduction to case marking than you usually find. Oh, and Jessie drew those birds! Those are Jessie-drawn birds in that table at the beginning!

Something that's kind of lovely is seeing how often Jessie uses both language sketches and language games as examples. In this chapter, there's a little game we did for LangTime Chat that was fun, but I always saw as a goof—I completely forgot about it—yet it is a perfect example of how two conlangers can use the same lexical material in two entirely different ways. Throughout the book she's used examples from language games and one-off sketches, and it's such a nice thing. She's able to find gold in anything and use it profitably.

Chapter 10: Noun Phrases

We are so fortunate to have this book! Two full and complete *separate* chapters on both nouns *and* noun phrases is a real treat. The full chapter on noun phrases allows Jessie to go into much more detail and provide much more variety than stuffing the subject into a big chapter on nouns would allow her to do. Behind the scenes, this text was supposed to be a *lot* shorter than it ended up being. That her editor allowed her the space to expand ensured we got chapters like this one. The variety of adjective placement on marking strategies found in various natlangs is especially appreciated in

this chapter to demonstrate just how much a conlanger can do with modifiers. A fantastic chapter!

I had a chuckle when I read through exercise 10.4. She provides options for demonstrative splits and notes that a four-way split is “far less common” than a two- or three-way split (or one demonstrative). Jessie and I (though “I” is a bit of a charitable inclusion here) did a four way split for Tpaalha which she included in this chapter. I remember when we created the system quite clearly because it was, to this day, the most incredible feat of live conlanging I have *ever* seen. Tpaalha is a language for opossums Jessie and I created live during the second season of our weekly YouTube series LangTime Studio, so there were plenty of witnesses to this feat. We were discussing possible demonstrative splits, and we decided to do a two-way distal split (near and far) and a two-way visibility split (seen and unseen) for a total of four demonstratives. As I was trying to think of if there’d be some sort of affix associated with visibility, Jessie said the four demonstratives should derive from four entirely separate lexemes. This struck me, at the moment, as the least probable thing to occur in a naturalistic language, so I challenged her to come up with four distinct lexical sources for a proximal~distal/visible~invisible demonstrative system that *I* would approve of. She took a minute or so to work, and then came up with the system you see on page 207. The system is perfect. It’s perfectly suited to opossums, it makes sense as a morphological system (all the sources are sense verbs, so it makes sense that they could all wind up as the same lexical class later), and it made perfect sense to me. It was the

second time in my life I had completely underestimated Jessie and she then proceeded to bowl me over. I haven't underestimated her since.

Chapter 11: Pronouns and Verb Agreement

Honestly ingenious to include verb agreement within the chapter on pronouns. Verbs are such a massive subject that it helps to approach them piecemeal (at least somewhat), so it was a brilliant idea to add nominal agreement to the pronoun chapter, since, of course, the most likely verb agreement you see is with pronominal arguments. This is a lovely (and thorough) introduction to pronouns as a whole. If I seem to be repeating myself, it's because it's true. These are absolutely wonderful introductions and general references for any conlanger.

Something I appreciate about how this book is written is it reinforces not just the iterative process of conlanging but the importance of revision. Throughout each chapter Jessie references future chapters (e.g. talking about verb agreement that may need to be revisited once further verb inflection is fleshed out in later chapters) and previous chapters (e.g. referring to the chapters on nominal inflection in discussing pronouns). It's difficult for students to appreciate revision when it comes to writing essays—and understandably so. An essay has a beginning and end, and it's much easier to alter what's coming than change what's already been written. A language, though, has no beginning and no end, and every part of it depends crucially on every other part. This *requires* the conlanger to start in medias res, and simultaneously *requires* the conlanger to accept the reality of constant revision, be it small or large. The constant reenforcement of

the concept of revision makes it seem much more approachable; less frightening. At the same time, it's wonderful that Jessie makes it clear that the conlanger need not fear making any decisions that depend on yet-to-be-made decisions. It's okay to say verbs will agree with their subjects and to create that subsystem only to change it later when TAM inflection comes. It's a very gentle introduction to conlanging, which I think is crucial for drawing in new conlangers.

Chapter 12: Verbs

No matter how much material was relegated to other chapters, the chapter on verbs was always going to be a beast, and this chapter is *dense*. The subject of this chapter alone could be a book, and if one imagines a bookshelf series of conlang *books* (as opposed to just one), I'd love to see the book Jessie could write on verbs alone. Even so, this is a great introduction that should probably be separated into different reading sessions if a beginning conlanger is tackling the text. It will help to truly understand aspect, for example, before moving on to further sections (and I love the star graphics she came up with for demonstrating aspect).

As a small aside, it was fun to read the description of chopping vegetables as squirrels scurried by as it called to mind an animation Jessie made for a LangTime Chat episode in which she was chopping vegetables as I was working on the computer and a bird flew by. It's worth a look if you haven't seen it!

Chapter 13: Word Formation

I love this sentence which opens the chapter summary: “The focus of this chapter was on growing your lexicon in a *conscientious* way” (emphasis mine). This chapter is both a must for all conlangers, and I feel the most helpful for conlangers who struggle with creating vocabulary. Conlangers seem to fall into two camps: those that love creating vocabulary, and those that can do everything *but* create vocabulary. Going through the various word formation processes step-by-step in this way is, I feel, the most helpful way to approach to get one’s head around fleshing out a conlang’s vocabulary. I believe it will help with the blank page problem.

One key feature for veteran conlangers to pay attention to in this chapter is the strategy Jessie laid out for developing—and keeping track of—stages of a conlang’s evolution. In terms of naturalism, this has been my greatest weakness over the years. That is, if you have, say, 20 sound changes, it isn’t the case that the language was in state x , 20 sound changes happened in a generation, and then the language was in state y . This is a process that takes several hundred years, and speakers don’t wait to either borrow new words in or create new derivational strategies. It stands to reason that the sound changes will apply in various ways depending on when and how the words came into the language (and, yes, this will also be inextricably intertwined with the history of the language. With new technologies and new contacts, new words will be needed when they’re needed, and they’re borrowed in at a fairly specific moment in the language’s history). A truly masterful naturalistic conlang will keep careful track of exactly when vocabulary is created in the history of the language and note which

processes apply and which don't. (And I freely acknowledge that doing so requires exactly the type of patience I typically lack.)

Chapter 14: Beyond Basic Clause Structure

This is easily the densest chapter of the book. It's *heavy* and will likely require rereading, but it that makes sense given the subject. Again, in a conlang book series, this is another chapter that could be a book. I think the element that shines the most in this chapter are the examples, both nat- and conlang. Conlangers need to see the type of variety that exists when it comes to clause interaction to understand precisely where they're unaware of their own native language biases, so the examples throughout this chapter are vital. (Also, it's a testament to how dense this chapter is that the concept of heavy shift is reduced to an aside within one of the chapter exercises at the end! I hope conlangers read through those exercises even if they don't do them, because there's gold in there!)

Chapter 15: Complex Modifying Forms

This chapter contains my absolute favorite illustration in the entire book: the small mouse compared to the larger turtle. I LOVE it! That little drawing alone is worth the price of the book. It's also a nice illustration of comparison, and I like Jessie's terminology (topic, quality, and standard) a lot better than anything else I've found in the linguistics literature. This chapter also very elegantly explains the concept of the converb. Like ergativity or the construct state, the converbial form is a feature

conlangers hear about and want to employ without quite understanding it because it sounds cool and different. The description here is perfect, as are the examples—exceedingly clear and concise.

Something that's a bit different in this chapter is there's a kind of mini comparison between four languages (three natlangs and one conlang) showing how they use nonfinite verb forms. It's a nice change of pace, and also helps to illustrate how these nonfinite forms work as a system. A great feature of this chapter!

Chapter 16: Orthography

This may be my favorite chapter—and not just because it's on my favorite subject! Jessie brilliantly lays out the differences between a romanization and an orthography (a distinction that's lost on many conlangers), and details how to do both. Honestly, even though writing systems is one of the major chapters of *The Art of Language Invention*, and it occupies a greater percentage of that book than this chapter does with *The Conlang Guide*, this chapter feels more complete and informative—and it doesn't even talk about font making! I never would have thought of devoting space to discussing how to adapt an existing orthography to a conlang, but it's a great idea, since I think it's something that interests a lot of conlangers, and it can be useful for those developing romanizations, as well. But my favorite bit are the glyphs Jessie creates. I'd love to see an orthography for English that follows the style Jessie developed for the glyphs for “reign” and “stare”. It's so evocative! Very well done. And also a wonderful demonstration of how you can start with a squirrel drawing and get to six different

potential modern glyphs. I think it's a really excellent demonstration of what a conlanger might do in developing their own orthography. (Also a really interesting adaptation of the Cherokee syllabary to Squirrelish!)

Chapter 17: Translation

What a brilliant idea to do an entire chapter on translation! Jessie is correct in saying that the bulk of our work is translation, and translation is a far different beast from creating a language. It requires entirely different skills and you're doing different things from creating sounds, creating paradigms, adding sound changes... For some conlangers (and I'm definitely in this camp) the process can be quite tedious—and daunting. The first text she chooses to translate is perfect, because it's the exact type of text a conlanger would look at and recoil in horror from. It's a really cool thing to see her go through the entire thing step by step, including her initial notes. It provides a demonstration of a process that conlangers who find themselves intimidated might use to make the process a bit friendlier. This is a fantastic way to end the book, and I can't think of a better image to part with than a squirrel wearing the top of an acorn as a little hat!