

Encountering conlangs

Deak Kirkham investigates
the intriguing phenomenon
of constructed languages.



Here's a linguistic brain-teaser: which of the following language extracts is the odd one out?

1. **bortaS blr jablu'DI' reH QaQqu' nay'.**
2. **Euskara Euskal Herriko hizkuntza da.**
3. **bóo wil di le neth.**
4. **En la mondo venis nova sento.**
5. **xu do se jbobau.**

Not an easy one, perhaps. One or two of the extracts may seem familiar to a few readers; others, I suspect, are less familiar. This being an odd-one-out game, any one could of course be the metaphorical black sheep; however, for the purposes of this article, the odd one out is number 2, an example of Euskara (Basque), the language of the Euskaldunak (the Basque people). Basque is a language isolate – but that is not the reason. Basque is also a minority

language in the context of the Spanish nation as constituted at the time of writing – but this is also not the reason...

Instead, of the five, Euskara is the only language which is *not* a constructed language, or conlang. The others in top-to-bottom order are: Klingon (from the American TV and film series Star Trek), Láadan (constructed by the poet-author-linguist Dr Suzette Hayden Elgin for her science fiction novel Native Tongue), Esperanto (the constructed language of Polish polymath L. L. Zamenhof), and Lojban (a logical language based on predicate logic with the aim of removing ambiguity from communication). This article surveys these languages and scrutinises the phenomenon of conlangs, looking at the different types, possible definitions, the example of Esperanto, and conlangs' value for the language sciences and language education.

Let's begin with a more in-depth look at each of the five languages above:

1. **Klingon** was initially constructed by Dr Marc Okrand for the 1984 film *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*. Okrand is also the creator of the Atlantean language for Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*:

bortaS blr	jablu'DI'	reH QaQqu'	nay'
When	cold	revenge	dish

'Revenge is a dish best served cold' (an 'old' Klingon proverb)

2. **Euskara** (Basque) is not a constructed language:

Euskara	Euskal	Herriko	hizkuntza	da
Basque	Basque	people-POSS	language	is

'Basque is the language of the Basque people' (the opening sentence of the Euskara Wikipedia article on Euskara)

3. **Láadan** was constructed by Dr Suzette Haden Elgin to test hypotheses concerning the relationship between language and thought, and as a language in her *Native Tongue* science fiction series:

Bóo	wil	di	le	neth
Hypothetical-marker	request-marker	speak/say	I	you-OBJ

'I would like to speak with you please'

4. **Esperanto** was constructed by L. L. Zamenhof and made public in 1887:

En	la	monda	venis	nova	sentto
In	the	world	come.PAST	new	feeling/sentiment

'A new sensation has come into the world' / 'There is a new sensation in the world' (the first line of the Esperanto Anthem *La Espero*)

5. **Lojban** was constructed by the Logical Language Group from 1987 onwards:

xu	do	se	jobbau
Is-it-true-that	you	is-a	speak-of-Lojban

'Do you speak Lojban?' (taken from the Wikipedia article on logban)

Definitions and types

So what are constructed languages? A partial answer lies in the term itself: they are languages that have been 'constructed'. But what does that mean? 'Constructed' is a close synonym to 'created': these languages are the conscious creative output of one person (or a small group of people), and in that sense at least they differ from English, Japanese or Xhosa, which have no 'creator', or even an identifiable beginning. As part of its constructed nature, a conlang typically has a purpose: they can be seen as genetically modified (or enhanced) languages. Beyond that, however, it is hard to say more without

courting controversy and plunging into profound linguistic questions.

For example, is it fair to say that conlangs are artificial, or that they are in some sense 'not natural'? Many devotees of the conlangs movement ('conlangers', as they are known) object to this terminology. They make the point that conlangs carry the same powers of expression as ethnic/national languages in terms of their ability to convey thought, and that writing can also be seen as an artificial cultural artefact (as opposed to a 'natural' form of oral communication), yet is nevertheless studied and taught as part of language. They

might also note that borrowings into other languages can be considered artificial, and that certain registers of national/ethnic languages are constructs (does anyone actually speak 'Standard English?'). Finally, they may note that certain ethnic/national languages themselves, such as modern Hebrew and Cornish, have a degree of artificiality about them. In this sense, even contemporary international English can be seen as artificial: the product of an Old English grammatical base modified by contact with Norse and then further modified grammatically, and infused lexically, by contact with Norman French. All languages

therefore can be argued to have an artificial, constructed element to them; perhaps conlangs simply compress ‘natural’ processes into the mind of a single language creator?

Conlangs also face the accusation that they lack a culture, nation or literature. Indeed, it was this sense of the need for a language to have a culture and history that led one particular conlang creator, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, to begin creating peoples and myths for the conlangs he had begun to construct as a teenager in the early 1900s, resulting in the Lord of the Rings and the less well-known Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales and the Children of Hurin, in which much of the backstory can be found. This is one type of ‘social context’ for a language, but it is hardly a real world community (although there are a number of speakers of Tolkien’s languages). However, some conlangs have made it in the real world, the most impressive of which is Esperanto. The question then arises: does a conlang need a community of speakers to be a full language, and if so, how big does the community need to be?

These are far from the only questions raised by the conlangs phenomenon. One might ask where they stand in relation to other ‘non-core’ forms of language such as pidgins and creoles, second language learner interlanguages, or argots. Or one might wonder why they exist at all. Such questions lie beyond this article, but before moving on let us conclude this section with a short taxonomy of types of conlangs, which tend to be abbreviated on the model of computer languages.

Abbreviation	Full form	Examples
Auxlang	International Auxiliary Language (IAL)	These languages, also known as ‘planned’ languages, aspire to facilitate cross-linguistic communication, often through a formal system which is claimed to be easier to learn. Esperanto is the most widely used.
Englang (engelang/ engilang)	Engineered language	Englangs reflect the attempt to integrate some ideal, (philosophical, logical or linguistic) into a language. For example, Lojban reflects principles of predicate logic and Suzette Haden Elgin constructed Láadan with the aim of testing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in relation to putative female-specific thinking and concerns.
Fictlang/altlang	Fictional language/ alternative language	Fictlangs are created for fictional (often fantasy or sci-fi) settings and include Dothakri (from HBO’s Games of Thrones), Klingon (Star Trek), Atlantean (Atlantis: The Lost Empire), Na’vi (Avatar) and Tolkien’s Elvish Languages
Playlang/ Privlang	Play language/ Private language	Privlangs cover at least two phenomena: the rare case of cryptophasia, such as the case of June and Jennifer Gibbons, twins who developed a language only they could understand, and entirely individual languages intended for self-communication. Examples include Milwaukee resident Robert Ben Madison’s Talossan, author Robert Dessaix’s K, and J. R. R. Tolkien’s initial language creation work which gradually morphed into his fictlangs.

Of course, any typology oversimplifies. Láadan for example is both an englang (a feminist conlang with a particular perspective on female-specific communication) and a fictlang (as part of its creator’s science fiction writing). More generally, it can be argued that all auxlangs have some engineered element to them. However, such distinctions are meaningful and help to bring a certain conceptual order to conlangs.

A meander into Esperanto

Esperanto could be claimed to be the most widely used, and most impactful, of the conlangs. Chronologically, it is not the first of the major auxlangs: Volapuk predates it by a few years, and the Bishop of Chester John Wilkins’ ‘Philosophical Language’ (published in 1668) predates it by more than 200 years. However, it has grown to become the most widely used and most richly institutionalised of the auxlangs, beating even later twentieth century conlangs such as Interlingua. As such, Esperanto

poses a social history problem: why did this particular conlang triumph over its competitors? A similar question arises when we consider the relative failure of Esperanto in comparison to its creator's ambitions: it has not become the world's lingua franca, nor does it seem to have any real chance of becoming so.

Esperanto was on the table as a possible language for use by the League of Nations (the forerunner of the UN), before the proposal was vetoed by the French delegate. The language has had limited institutional acceptance since that point, but is taught in certain countries. Most significantly, the Esperanto-speaking community remains active, with regular gatherings around the world. Esperanto culture, and particularly the legacy of its founder, the Polish medical doctor Ludwik Zamenhof, have influenced world culture: there are hundreds of so-called Zamenhof-Esperanto Objects (ZEOs) around the world, and Esperanto has appeared in films, TV shows, and even computer software – the speech synthesis software Voki is Esperanto for 'to talk/to speak'.

Esperanto has itself also inspired (or is connected to) at least two further types of conlang. The first has been touched on already: redaction of the original Esperanto in the name of further simplification. The most well-known of these attempts is Ido (an Esperanto term meaning 'offspring' or 'descendant'). Like Esperanto, Ido has a (much smaller) active community, but was the first of many revisions of its parent. The so-called Esperantidos now number many tens. A second sense of an Esperanto-internal conlang is found in the work of Manuel Halvelik, who in



L. L. Zamenhof, creator of Esperanto

the 1960s and 1970s created three sociolects of Esperanto: Arcaicam Esperantom (Archaic or 'Old' Esperanto used to convey a sense of *temps passé*); Gavaro (Slang Esperanto), and Popido (a dialect form). The existence of these varieties of Esperanto adds considerable flexibility to the language and, intriguingly, brings into existence the phenomenon of the conlangs of a conlang!

We pass over Zamenhof's other ambition for Esperanto: world peace through the facility of international communication. Pre-Zamenhof, there were plenty of instances of organised military aggression between factions of one language (the English civil war and the American war of independence to name but two); post-Zamenhof, the world has continued to see great violence (all of Zamenhof's three children died in the holocaust) and the aspiration for peace through a shared language may seem idealistic to some. Europe's post-World War II stability seems to the author to have been achieved more through trade, and the machinery of politics, than through a shared language. In other words, there are limits to what a conlang can achieve.

What are the uses of conlangs?

Ĝis nun, tiel bona ('so far, so good'). But why – what is the point of these conlangs, and what do they do? More fundamentally, why do they exist, and why can't people be content with their own national/ethnic languages?

Cynics may say that fictlangs exist to make money, and it is not easy to dispute the view that fictlangs can generate a lot of profits: the revenue figures of *Game of Thrones* and *Avatar* speak for themselves (although the degree to which the respective fictlangs contributed to the bottom line is a matter for debate). However, one can take a less cynical view of the whole escapade and note that these fictional dramas bring great pleasure to many and constitute an engagement with linguistics. On a more literary note, the presence of a 'real' fictlang in a mythical world lends credibility to that creation. It is, all else being equal, less of a suspension of disbelief if a fictworld contains one or more fictlangs. Conlangs also have something to offer to the opaque world of phonaesthetics – does the sound of certain conlangs evoke certain emotional or aesthetic responses? James Cameron was offered three outlines of the Na'vi language by its creator, Paul Frommer, and chose the one whose sound most appealed to him. In a similar vein, Tolkien created his languages with phonaesthetic aspects in mind. The Black Speech of Mordor (in which the letters of the Ring are written) is described in pejorative terms in the books, whereas the Elvish languages are depicted as pleasant to the ear. In terms of language sciences, constructed languages may offer insightful ways of determining if and how certain sounds and sound

combinations are considered aesthetically pleasing by particular groups of humans or by the whole species.

In addition to phonaesthetic concerns, Láadan, for example, includes sets of sentence-initial particles which encode pragmatic functions such as whether an utterance is a question, warning or promise, and the evidential strength of the utterance from the speaker's perspective. The grammaticalisation of such discourse functions provides another example of conlangs as test cases: how much pragmatics can be put into a language?

Conlangs are replete with such intriguing grammatical features, making them in effect living linguistic laboratories that allow us to test many language science hypotheses.

We might also take the discussion of conlangs into language education. Is there a case for teaching certain conlangs to young people instead of more traditional European foreign languages? If the argument for teaching MFLs in schools is for students to discover another way of using words, then any complete (or even partially complete) conlang could serve the same purpose as, for example, French. In terms of student engagement, some conlangs may have an edge: Dothraki may be more motivating than Deutsch. If however the aim is to be able to communicate with other people, is there not a case for Esperanto, a conlang designed to be both easily learnable and free of cultural bias? The educational value of conlangs may make itself felt in higher education: although I am not aware of many (if any) degree level modules in conlangs, they could find a place on a variety of courses: linguistics, communication studies, film studies, sociology, history – even

literature. Within linguistics, such a module might include the partial invention of some kind of conlang, either a fictlang with a corresponding cultural backstory, or a partial loglang with certain idiosyncracies removed and a justification provided. This indeed could be treated as a conlang 'adaptation' of a contemporary national/ethnic language with the aim of eliminating ambiguity, simplifying a complex area of grammar, or adding expressive power.

Envoi

The conlang world is rarely seen as the hub of the linguistic universe: its (often self-conscious) idiosyncrasies and occasional geekiness render it unappealing to some, and there is scepticism about 'artificial' languages. Such perceptions are unfortunate, as not only are conlangs by definition the products of well-informed, skilled, creative and highly individual linguists (a study of the psychology of conlang creators would be interesting), but they are also intriguing and tantalising linguistic phenomena which raise and allow for the testing of questions of a fundamental nature, both theoretical (the nature of the relationship between thought and language; the 'naturalness' of linguistic structure) and practical (what might be most relevant to a linguistics degree; whether Na'vi should be taught to teenagers instead of Spanish). They are quirky, idiosyncratic, leftfield and curveball, but at the same time give literary and aesthetic pleasure, create passionate linguo-cultural communities and hold up a mirror to the language sciences. Long live the conlangs! ¶

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Find out more

Akira Okrent (2013) *In the Land of Invented Languages*, Penguin Random House (a humorous look at 900 year of (often failed) attempts at constructed languages).

J. R. R. Tolkien (2016) *A Secret Vice*, Harper Collins (a reissue of a Tolkien essay on the thrills of constructed languages)

Mark Rosenfelder (2006) *The Language Construction Kit*, Yonagu Book, and (2012) *Advanced Language Construction*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (practical approaches to language construction).

Online

Find out more about some of the conlangs discussed here at the following websites:

Esperanto – Esperanto.us

Klingon – kli.org

Laadan – laadanlanguage.wordpress.com

Lojban – mw.lojban.org/papri/
Lojban