Introduction

What is a constructed language?

Constructed languages are languages that are consciously and deliberately created by one person or a small group of people. They possess many of the known salient qualities of other human languages—most notably, that they are symbolic systems for conveying and interpreting some sort of messages. Furthermore, a great many constructed languages could feasibly be spoken, employing speech sounds found in other spoken languages. They are doubtless some of the most ambitious creative projects associated with language.

The circumstances surrounding the genesis of constructed languages crucially define them, yet even here constructed languages resemble other ‘natural’ phenomena. Constructed languages, at least in their initial stages, resemble pidgins, in that they lack native speakers. However, constructed languages and pidgins otherwise have rather different circumstances of genesis: constructed languages rarely, if ever, initially emerge out of some sort of community of speakers, but rather more usually from a single creator. The conscious and deliberate impetus underlying the creation of constructed languages aligns them somewhat with language games, such as Pig Latin, which are more conscious creations than natural languages such as English or French.

Constructed languages, furthermore, are distinguishable by what could be termed the epistemological source of their rules. While constructed languages are rule-governed systems just as other human languages are, their rules, at least initially, tend to be disseminated in a tidy (perhaps simplified) form, often from the introspections and downright whims of a single individual. This contrasts with conventional natural languages, the epistemological source of which is a bit controversial, but surely lies somewhere within the (perhaps complex) interplay between what is in the minds of speakers and how these speakers interact with one another. The exceptional epistemological source of rules in constructed languages has raised some questions in the minds of linguists as to whether constructed languages count as ‘real’ languages or not, since they lack this key property of natural languages. This, in turn, has probably contributed to the fact that linguistics, as a discipline, has mostly shied away from the study of constructed languages.

Constructed languages are also known by myriad other terms, including ‘artificial languages’, ‘invented languages’, ‘glossopoeia’, and ‘model languages’. The most widespread term for this sort of language among the community of people who create them is *conlang*,...
a neoclassical-esque compound/blend, derived from constructed and language. This term arose in 1991 as the short name of a mailing list devoted to the discussion of such languages (see discussion later in this chapter), but came to be used for the name of the languages themselves. This neologism gives rise to the related verb conlang (‘to create a constructed language’) and a further related noun conlanger (‘one who creates a constructed language’). Because the term ‘conlang’ is a little less unwieldy than the term ‘constructed language’, I shall use the former in the remainder of this chapter.

**A rough-and-ready classification of constructed languages**

Conlangs can be – and are – constructed for many different purposes; however, most conlangs have a central (or perceived central) purpose. This purpose can serve as a convenient way of classifying a given conlang. So, following in the traditions found in the conlanging community, I use purpose as the means of classifying conlangs. This section, then, will detail the ‘received’ typology of conlangs based on purpose and, in the process, briefly introduce some of the more well-known conlangs.

The most well-known purpose for a conlang is to serve as an alternative means of communication for speakers of various linguistic backgrounds. This sort of language, which ostensibly tries to undo the effect of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, is most often known as an ‘international auxiliary language’, because these languages are intended to transcend international language differences. The term ‘auxiliary language’ is sometimes abbreviated in a manner similar to conlang to yield auxlang. The most famous auxlang is Esperanto, invented in the late nineteenth century by polyglot L. L. Zamenhof, a resident of what is now Poland. An example of Esperanto is given in example (1):

| Help-as se oni kon-as Esperanto-n.       |
| help-PRES if one know-PRES Esperanto-ACC |
| ‘It helps if one knows Esperanto.’       |

*(Gledhill, 2000: 91)*

Gledhill (2000) offers a good, linguistic-oriented, reference grammar of Esperanto. Esperanto is in the unique position of having the most speakers of any auxlang – any conlang, in fact. However, there are a considerable number of other auxlangs other than Esperanto.

Another well-known purpose for a conlang is to accompany a work of fiction. This type of language has hitherto been termed a ‘fictional language’, although because of potential ambiguities, the term ‘parafictional language’ (that is, a language that occurs alongside fiction) is perhaps clearer. This subtype of conlang is well represented in the genres of science fiction and fantasy. Science fiction’s most famous conlang is arguably Klingon, a language created by American linguist Marc Okrand for a race of aliens in the *Star Trek* franchise of television series and films (Klingon, in Okrand’s conception, first appeared in 1984’s *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*). An example of Klingon is given in example (2):

| DI-Hlv-pu’ Suth-tah-vIS chaH.       |
| 1PL>3PL-attack-PFV negotiate-COMP-while 3PL |
| ‘While they were negotiating, we attacked them.’ |

*(Okrand, 1992: 63)*
Okrand (1992) offers a quality, if brief, grammatical description of Klingon. Fantasy’s most famous conlangs are Quenya and Sindarin, two languages created by British author/philologist J. R. R. Tolkien for the Elves who dwell in his created world, Middle-Earth, which serves as the setting of a great many of his works, including The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings trilogy. An example of Sindarin is provided in example (3):

\begin{quote}
Celebrimbor o Eregion teith-ant i thiw hin.
\end{quote}

(proper.name) from (place.name) write-PST.3SG DET [MUT]letter.PLP ROX.DEM.PL

‘Celebrimbor of Eregion wrote these letters.’

(Salo, 2004: 206)

Salo (2004) provides a reference grammar of Sindarin (although there are some students of Tolkien’s languages who view this more as a work describing ‘Neo-Sindarin’ – Sindarin in Salo’s conception – rather than a precise description of Tolkien’s work). Quenya has yet to be documented in a book-length reference work.

Apart from Quenya and Sindarin, there are many more parafictional languages in fantasy; in fact, it appears that the visibility of parafictional conlangs is on the rise (see the discussion below). In this chapter, I will limit my discussion of the role(s) that this kind of conlang can play within literary works, but greater explorations have been made in the literature: in Stockwell (2006); and, more extensively, in Cheyne (2008).

Some conlangs are created for testing hypotheses about language or, at least, for exploring the logical conclusions of particular viewpoints on language. This class of conlang is often termed an ‘engineered language’, or engelang. The most famous engelang is arguably Loglan, a language created in the 1950s by American sociologist James Cooke Brown (1960) to test whether an allegedly radically different language would change people’s thought patterns. Loglan additionally employs a certain number of ideas from formal logic in its design, and thus also represents the class of engelangs that have explored ideas from logic in language.

The creation of a large number of conlangs – although few that are particularly visible – is driven by the particular aesthetic views of their creator. While it is probably the case that all conlangs have this property to a degree, conlangs that centrally have this aesthetically driven purpose are generally known as ‘artistic languages’, or artlangs. One aesthetic driving some artlangers is the creation of a language that could, quite plausibly, be found in the external world. Conlangs with this purpose could be termed ‘naturalistic languages’. Other artlangers are driven by their own internal sensibilities, which might not reflect natural languages particularly closely. The resulting languages are very personal forms of expression for their creators and, in fact, may be secret. These languages are often referred to as ‘personal languages’. In principle, it seems that a naturalistic language could also be a personal language, but in practice the two sets of artlangs are generally considered distinct within the conlanging community. Few ‘pure’ artlangs are well known outside of the conlanging community, so which should be considered most famous is a bit unclear. But one could consider all of Tolkien’s languages as examples, because they appear to have begun their existence as artlangs before moving on to become parafictional languages.

As a final means of classifying conlangs, it is seen as useful to provide some information about the source of the language’s vocabulary, much as it has been useful to designate which language contributed the majority of the vocabulary in a pidgin or creole. Conlangs having vocabulary not closely modelled on any known language – non-constructed or constructed – are generally termed ‘a priori languages’. Conlangs in which the vocabulary is derived from
some previously attested language are known as ‘a posteriori' languages’. The lexicons of some a posteriori languages might be difficult to distinguish from a pidgin or creole, at least at first glance. A collection of a posteriori languages has been, and continues to be, created around certain historical ‘what if’ scenarios, giving rise to the conlanging analogue of the literary subgenre of alternative history. One such conlang is Andrew Smith’s Brithenig, a fictional Celtic-influenced Romance language of Britain, imagined to exist in a world in which Romano-British culture persisted in Britannia because there was no Anglo-Saxon settlement of the British Isles.

Historical perspectives

As a result of the often secretive nature of conlanging, the history of the activity is somewhat incomplete. Nevertheless, there are indications that conlanging has been pursued by some for a long time. In writing up this section’s summary history, I have relied heavily on the accessibly written historical information provided in Okrent (2009).

What is considered to be the first recorded conlang was Lingua Ignota, created by Hildegard von Bingen, a twelfth-century German churchwoman and polymath. However, Lingua Ignota is more noted as a list of vocabulary items than a vocabulary plus grammar. For a thorough discussion of Hildegard’s work, see Higley (2007).

In the 1600s, the number of attested conlangs increased, perhaps not incidentally given the (fairly recent) advances in book technology and in mathematical notation systems. As Okrent (2009) points out, much of the conlanging from this time until the early-to-mid twentieth century has been predicated on the view that language is imperfect and is in need of fixing. This entails that language has several ‘problems’: the ‘problem’ with which most seventeenth-century conlangers were preoccupied is how meaning is conveyed in language. This preoccupation gave rise to what could be considered the age of philosophical engelangs. Conlangs from this era, such as John Wilkins’ Universal Language of 1668, sought to exhaustively categorise the world, and then rework the expression of this categorisation through a completely transparent and compositional system. That is, given a taxonomy of the world, certain symbols/sounds could be assigned to basic primitive notions (and only to them). These symbols/sounds could then be recombined in principled ways to yield all necessary concepts, expressed in a clear and unambiguous way. Wilkins’ language may be the most comprehensive and well documented of the languages of this era, but similar projects were pursued by other independently famous intellectuals of the era, including philosopher René Descartes and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz. Given that the seventeenth-century engelangs were designed to be grounded in reality, which for most Enlightenment-era thinkers had one true form, these languages had the additional benefit of being universal: any human, with knowledge of how the world works generally and how the form-meaning mapping worked in a particular engelang, could express anything, which could be unambiguously interpreted by others. This circumvented another ‘problem’ of language: not all humans speak the same one, making communication between some individuals difficult, if not impossible.

This latter ‘problem’ – overcoming the barriers to cross-cultural communication – was the central focus of nineteenth-century conlangers. This era in conlanging could be seen as the age of the auxlang. Esperanto (developed in 1887) is the most well-known product of this era, but it is hardly the only one. Esperanto was antecedced, for instance, by Volapük in 1879, a language created by German priest Johann Schleyer. An example of Volapük is given in example (4):
Both Esperanto and Volapük were constructed on similar principles: they include elements of pre-existing languages (although the languages are exclusively European in origin) to make the language-learning process easier.

Overcoming the cross-cultural barrier was also behind the invention of Solresol in 1827 by Frenchman Jean-François Sudre. However, instead of taking words from various European languages, Solresol is grounded in the idea that music is literally the universal language. Thus the basic units of sound system of Solresol are the seven pitches of the Western diatonic scale (referred to by their names in French). An example of Solresol is given in example (5):

\[\text{dore mifala dosifare re dosiresi.}\]

\(1\text{sg} \text{desire beer and pastry}\)

\(\text{I want some beer and a pastry.}\)  

\(\text{(5)}\)  

\(\text{Gajewski, 1902}\)

While the twentieth century saw some continuation of the age of auxlangs, several new strands of conlanging appeared. One was a return to engelanging, in light of several new ideas about the nature of language. Both Loglan in 1955, and its offspring Lojban in 1987, were part of this trend. Loglan was expressively invented to test the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – that is, the view that the structure of a language limits, or at least affects, the worldviews or cognitive processes of its speakers – but both of these engelangs also ‘borrowed’ ideas or concerns from several other previous eras of conlanging: a basis in predicate logic or a mathematical system (akin to the seventeenth-century conlangs); and using various pre-existing languages as a lexical source (akin to nineteenth-century conlangs). However, Lojban did cast a considerably wider cross-linguistic net than any nineteenth-century auxlang, including the non-European Arabic, Hindi, and Chinese as part of the collection of its models. An example of Lojban is given in example (6):

\[\text{ci lo nanmu cu bevri le pipno.}\]

\(\text{three distr.art men pred.mkr carry def.art piano}\)

\(\text{Each of the three men carried the piano.}\)  

\(\text{(6)}\)  

\(\text{Turner & Nicholas, 2002: 45}\)

Furthermore, Loglan was by no means the only twentieth-century conlang to consider the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Suzette Hagen Elgin’s (1982) Láadan was also influenced by the promise of testing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, even while not including any other design principles found in Loglan or Lojban.

The other significant twentieth-century development is most well known from the work of J. R. R. Tolkien. A prolific conlanger, Tolkien was influenced by his philological interests (or perhaps it was the other way around), and thus devised whole sets of different historical sound changes in his languages and traced the etymologies of his words back to their
original source. Thus Tolkien seems to have pioneered the application of ideas from the academic study of language to conlanging in an era (the first three decades of the twentieth century) during which that was not so common. His conlanging work also was very much art for art’s sake: his languages carried no promise of expressing thought clearly (or at least no more clearly than natural languages) and no promise of solving any sort of communication problem. These attitudes, however inexplicit, coupled with the widespread popularity that Tolkien achieved through his novels, seem to have allowed the artlang to come into its own as a conlang form – although the artlang may have been headed in that direction anyway: linguist M. A. R. Barker’s collection of languages (most notably, Tsolyáni), created apparently independently of Tolkien, share many properties with Tolkien’s work. Barker’s languages were also art for art’s sake, used natural languages as a model, and, in fact, were developed for an external source: an early role-playing game, The Empire of the Petal Throne. The rise of the artlang, regardless of its precise historical origins, leads directly to some of the more recent developments in conlanging, to which I now turn.

Current contributions

Constructed languages in popular culture

Over the last few decades of the twentieth century and especially in the first few years of the twenty-first century, the salience of conlangs in Western popular culture has reached its highest levels ever (even if these are not particularly high). The trend began in the early 1980s with the invention of Klingon for the Star Trek universe. Fan interest led to the publication of some Klingon language instruction material, as well as, ultimately, several texts in Klingon, including a translation of Shakespeare’s Hamlet (Nicholas & Strader, 2000), and the formation of the Klingon Language Institute, an organisation that brings together people interested in the Klingon language, for whatever reason. One fan reportedly even tried to raise his child as a native Klingon speaker.

The use of conlangs in fictional works has increased further in the twenty-first century. This was first seen in film. The release of Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings trilogy (2001–03) reawakened awareness of Tolkien’s Sindarin and Quenya. These films also saw new additions to the Sindarin and Quenya corpora, as linguist David Salo provided some new lines in the Elvish languages that were not in the Tolkien original. The trend continued in the latter part of that same decade. The film Avatar (2009) included the language Na’vi, created by University of Southern California Professor Paul Frommer, as a language employed by the aliens central to the plot of the film. An example of Na’vi is given in example (7):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mi } & \text{ na’ring po terian a krr, tsol} & \text{e’a nant} & \text{agit.} \\
\text{in } & \text{ forest } & \text{3SG } & \text{IPFV.} \text{walk } & \text{while } & \text{PFV. see } & \text{viperwolf.PAT} \\
\text{‘When he was walking in the forest, he saw a viperwolf.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\text{(Learn Na’vi, 2012)}

The use of conlangs in fictional worlds also began to play a significant role in television shows in the first part of the 2010s, although earlier shows had included conlangs as part of their story-telling: The Land of the Lost (1974–76), using Pakuni, created by linguist Victoria Fromkin; and Dark Skies (1996–97), using Thhtmaa, created by linguist Matt Pearson. The HBO series Game of Thrones, which premiered in 2011, has included the languages
of Dothraki and High Valyrian, both created by David Peterson. Dothraki is spoken by a cultural group distinct from that of most of the main characters in the show. An example of Dothraki is given in example (8):

\[
\text{Shireak-i} \quad \text{gor-i} \quad \text{ha} \quad \text{yeraan} \\
\text{star-PL} \quad \text{charge-PRES.3PL} \quad \text{for} \quad \text{2SG.ALL} \\
\text{‘Good luck’ (literally ‘The stars are charging for you’)} \quad (8)
\]

(Peterson, 2014: 27)

Materials for learning Dothraki have been published in Peterson (2014). High Valyrian, in contrast to Dothraki, is employed as a dead language of cultural import within the Game of Thrones universe.

The Syfy series Defiance, which premiered in 2013, has also featured languages designed by David Peterson: Castithan, Irathient, and Indojisnen. Each of these languages is spoken by extraterrestrial species that are on Earth within the context of the story.

While I am aware of no systematic studies to back this up, it is very likely that the increased visibility of conlangs in television and film has inspired an increasing number of people to engage in the activity of conlanging compared with previously, when constructed languages were not nearly as visible.

Recent changes within the conlanging community

During roughly the same time as the rise of conlangs in popular culture (although perhaps starting a bit later, in the 1990s), interactions between members of the conlanging community were revolutionised. Conlanging has been (and in many ways still is) a very solitary activity: individuals have generally worked alone to create words, decide on grammatical properties, and (if they so choose) otherwise flesh out the philosophical and/or cultural underpinnings to their language. Once created, most conlangs have a speech community of or near to only one. Given the solitary nature of conlanging, it is not surprising that, until recently, most conlangers had never actually met in person, or otherwise known, any other conlangers. This changed with the rise of the Internet. The earliest established means of online conlanger interconnection was the The Conlang Mailing List, an email mailing list that started in the early 1990s. This forum gave conlangers from all sorts of disparate locations the chance to interact with each other. Discussion ranging from presenting new projects, through philosophical discussion of conlanging, to threads about specific natural or constructed languages became common on this list. The Conlang Mailing List also prompted the creation of a new conlang-related game: the Conlang Relay. A relay amounts to a game of Telephone played via conlangs, with the original message being obscured by the successive different grammars of the participant conlangs (as well as errors in translation). More than twenty relays have been conducted since the first one in 1999.

As the years have gone by, other online forums have come into being, broadly functioning in the same fashion as The Conlang Mailing List, including several bulletin boards – most notably, the Zompist Bulletin Board (ZBB) – as well as numerous groups on social media. Paradoxically enough, these electronic outlets seem actually to have led to more in-person meetings between conlangers. These outlets have provided a means for discovering who else is interested in the activity; once a subset of individuals discover that they live in close proximity to each other, it becomes much more feasible to meet in person. In this vein, an
event known as the Language Creation Conference (LCC) has emerged as the largest and most regular conlanging gathering. First held in 2006, the LCC has become a biennial event at which conlangers and other interested parties can get together to discuss intellectual issues related to conlanging, as well as to celebrate the activity. To date, it has been held in several different locales in the United States and has also been held in the Netherlands.

Critical issues and creative methodologies

Confronting conlangers at the outset of their creation is the whole of phonology (or orthography, if the language is solely to be written), morphology, lexicon, syntax, and semantics: creating all of this for a language is a significant task. How have conlangers approached it? Conlangers, of course, can – and do – choose whatever approach they want, but still creation is rarely random. Crucial to providing conlangers with a framework for their creation is the presence – acknowledged or not – of what I will call a conceit. A conceit could be conceived of as a statement about the intended milieu or utility of the language. In fact, the classification system mentioned in the first section ties closely with this concept of conceit: that classification system is organised by what could be considered ‘conceit group’. However, a conceit for a given conlang is typically more specific than the categories in the classification system presented at the outset of this chapter might indicate. For instance, Klingon’s conceit probably would not be ‘a language for a fictional television/film franchise’, but rather ‘a language for a race of aggressive, militaristic, barbaric alien bad guys with ridged foreheads, dwelling within the Star Trek universe’. Conceits, however, do not exhaustively determine all aspects of a conlang’s creation; rather, they can provide some parameters to make the creation process more manageable. Much of their usefulness becomes apparent when one considers some of the creation strategies employed by conlangers.

Strategies for creating languages

If conceits provide only some boundary conditions on language creation, how is the rest of it accomplished? In my experience as a conlanger, as well as an observer of fellow conlangers, it seems that most creation of grammar (that is, phonological rules, morphological rules, syntactic rules, and rules governing the interpretations of words and phrases) follows one (or more) of the following four creation strategies.

1. Use one’s own intuitions or personal preferences about language structure.
2. Use structures that are modelled on one or more pre-existing languages.
3. Use structures that seem to, or are known to, be easily learnable.
4. Use structures dictated by a pre-existing theory of language or a pre-existing conception (perhaps one’s own) of the language.

Let me detail these strategies to a greater extent, additionally noting where, within the conlanging world, each has been most frequently used.

The use of one’s own intuitions or preferences is very much in keeping with the activity of inventing a language: conlangers are in control of their own languages. Furthermore, the use of intuitions is a very useful ‘shortcut’: the totality of any language is enormous, but because all conlangers already use at least one language, they can rely on their previous experiences with that language to reduce the enormity and therefore make creation a bit more feasible. When used in moderation, the use of one’s intuitions is unproblematic, but
overreliance on one’s intuitions could be dangerously self-limiting. The logical extreme of overreliance on familiar structures is known in the conlanging community as a ‘relex’ (short for a ‘relexification’): a recreation of the conlanger’s native language with different words. More seasoned language creators generally look down upon efforts that are clearly relexes, although they are harmless as pedagogical tools. (They seem to me to occupy a status similar to recopying previously written music, which could be a useful learning tool, but is certainly not music composition.) While there is nothing inherently wrong with using familiar structures in one’s own conlang, it seems better to use them through deliberate choice rather than to have them appear accidentally. And, arguably, if the inclusion of a particular structure is a deliberate choice, preferences – and not mere intuitions – are being employed. By ‘preferences’, I refer to aspects of language structure that a given conlanger finds in some way aesthetically pleasing. The source of these aesthetic judgements remains, presently, a bit of a mystery. All conlangers (and, in fact, maybe all students of language) have particular structures that they find appealing, but the specific preferences are not necessarily uniform across conlangers. Furthermore, I strongly suspect that individuals cannot consciously articulate why they prefer particular structures. I, for one, do not know why I really like second-position clitic subject pronouns, but it is clear that I think that they are a neat linguistic structure. The source of personal preferences notwithstanding, I would surmise that the inclusion of personal favourites is a very common trait among all conlangers and is found with all sorts of conlangs, regardless of whether the inclusion is deliberate or not and of whether the conlang is a personal language or not. Yet this strategy is likely to be raised to the highest level of importance if one’s conceit involves the creation of a personal language: how could a conlang be considered a personal language if it did not include a large selection of the creator’s own personal favourites?

The second strategy of modelling structures on pre-existing languages has some functional similarity to the strategy of using one’s own intuitions: by piggybacking on an actual language (or more), the conlanger can circumvent some of the obstacles to learning what a language is (which is essential for creating a new language). Given this plus and the ubiquity of models available to any conlanger, it is likely that this strategy also is used to a degree by every conlanger. However, this strategy is perhaps most prized (and employed to the greatest extent) by that class of conlangers which wants to create realistic, naturalistic conlangs. Akin to adherents to realism in visual arts, these realist conlangers seek to faithfully create (or perhaps ‘recreate’ would be more apt) a language truthfully, complete with all known general language properties, as well as with language-specific peculiarities. As with the visual arts, achieving a high degree of realism requires a high level of expertise. In the domain of conlangs, this expertise might include familiarity with details and inner workings of several different languages, coupled with a sense of the limits and commonalities in variation across all languages. As a practising conlanging realist myself, whenever I develop or rework a particular area of grammar, I research the known possibilities in that area within natural languages. This is not only to get ideas, but also to try to achieve an insight into the cross-linguistic commonality of various options, or try to determine other implicational relationships involving the immediate choice and other areas of the language. Overall, these research forays are to ensure that the new feature is as plausible as possible, within my language and across languages. Consequently, this kind of realism involves great depth of knowledge and attention to detail, much as a realist sculptor has to attend to each stroke of the chisel to make a piece look realistic. The level of depth involved all but ensures that only some conlangers will pursue this strategy to its greatest extents. Nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously using pre-existing languages as a model for
some portion of the language creation process is likely widespread, even if in-depth use of natural languages as models is restricted to the set of naturalistic conlangers.

The third strategy involves using structures that seem to be, or actually are, easy to learn. This represents a different approach from the first two strategies – but its appearance is not surprising, given that all conlangs start out as languages without first-language learners: why not include structures that might more easily allow learners (including, perhaps most importantly, the creator) to pick up the language? In spite of the potential for widespread use, this strategy seems to be most favoured by auxlangers. In fact, auxlang creators often laud their creation’s (supposed) ease of learnability as a selling point in favour of adopting it. Indeed, ‘supposed’ reflects a key aspect of how this strategy has generally been incorporated into conlanging: learnability arguments given by the auxlangers do not go beyond mere assertion that their language is quite easy to learn (albeit that being able to prove that a language is easily learnable is, ironically enough, not easy). Furthermore, those who make these kinds of arguments do not seem to take into account the fact that ease of learning one language can be a function of the learner’s native language, as well as other languages to which he or she may have been exposed. Nevertheless, there do seem to be languages that could provide apt points of comparison for auxlangers’ creations: creoles and pidgins. These languages, especially the latter class, appear to have some structural simplifications that allow for ease of learning. Yet most auxlangers seem to be unaware of the similarities between their creations and pidgins/creoles; consequently, connections between auxlangs and these contact-induced languages have hitherto not been made. Moreover, as tailor-made as the strategy of using ‘easy’ structures might be for auxlangs, not all conceits or aesthetics are amenable to it. In fact, this strategy seems to be rather antithetical to the naturalistic realist approach, which looks to create a conlang with peculiarities rather than a conlang that (necessarily) is easy to learn.

Finally, conlangers have employed a fourth strategy: using a pre-existing theory or conception of how language in general works to guide their creation. Like several of the other strategies, this strategy is probably utilised to a certain extent by all conlangers: every conlang represents an answer to the question ‘What is a possible language?’, and so every conlang embodies particular theoretical views on how languages work. In fact, using one’s intuitions about how languages work in one’s own conlanging (the first strategy discussed above) is to work within one’s conception of language, so, in some instances, this fourth strategy is indistinct from (some part of) the first. But when one considers how this strategy is used by a certain strand of conlangers – engelangers – differences do emerge. As noted at the outset of this chapter, engelangs, by their very nature, deal squarely with foundational ideas about the nature of language. So, to successfully create an engelang, one must be very aware of the nature of one’s concept and how that might interact with the language’s design. For example, if the goal is to create ‘the totally unambiguous language’, the conlanger must have a good handle on what the nature of ambiguity in language is and how this issue is to be circumvented or otherwise resolved. Like realist conlanging, engelanging also requires a high level of expertise in the areas that engelang is manipulating, and for this reason may not be appealing (or useful) to particular other subclasses of conlangers.

Nevertheless, the strategy of using pre-existing notions can be useful in creating para-fictional languages too. Most (fictional) speakers of para-fictional conlangs have a (quasi-) symbolic purpose within their work or, at the very least, are intended to evoke some ideas about language in general or about speakers of particular languages. Although not the same sort of conception with which engelangers work, these ‘literary’ preconceptions can be
constructed languages

employed in determining various facets of a parafictional language. Marc Okrand’s Klingon illustrates the possibilities. Klingons, within their fictional universe, are supposed to be aggressive, militaristic, and barbaric, as well as other-worldly; Okrand produced a language that thoroughly fits an English speaker’s stereotype of a language spoken by individuals with these properties. This is most evident in Klingon’s phonetics and phonology, wherein the presence of certain sound classes and syllable structure contribute to the effect.

Given in examples (9) and (10) are two Klingon sentences, both in Klingon romanisation and in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA):

DIHIvpu’ SutlhtaHvIS chaH.
[dɬɪxɪvpʰuʔ ʂутɬtʰaxviʂ tʃax]
‘While they were negotiating, we attacked them.’ (repeats example (2)) (9)

He chu’ ylghoS
[xɛ tʃuʔ jɪɣoʂ]
‘Follow a new course.’ (10)

(Okrand, 1992: 72)

The consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) syllables, tense vowels, and occasional glottal stops combine to yield a certain clipped sound that fits in with the aggressive, militaristic, and barbaric mould. The dorsal sounds (both velar and uvular, although the latter is not evident in examples (9) and (10)) also contribute to providing the ‘guttural sounds’ that such a language would surely have. The retroflex sounds and lateral affricates, then, add in a ‘not from around here’ quality also essential to Klingon. The net effects of choosing these kinds of sounds is that, first, Klingon has a distinct sound, and second, playing into these stereotypes makes the decisions about what sounds to include in a given language a less arbitrary exercise.

As this discussion has tried to indicate, a particular conceit and the strategies that a particular conlanger employs are, in principle, distinct and conlangers may find it useful to utilise any or all of the strategies. However, especially as the Klingon example shows, one function of the conceit can be to prioritise strategies. If a conlanger is trying to create a conlang that is ‘a language used in between nationalities on an alien planet’, gravitating towards including simpler structures might be more warranted than it is for a conlang intended for ‘personal journal entries’. Thus the conceit of a language and the strategies can be seen as working together to allow the creator to realise the conlang.

Creating the lexicon

While the foregoing discussion has largely been focused on grammatical structure, there is also the lexicon – that is, the collection of items that provide the basic mappings between forms and meanings – to consider. In the creation of a conlang’s lexicon, the conceit can take a more active role. While modern linguistics has gathered a wealth of data that suggest that the milieu of a given language does not strongly interact with the nature of its grammatical system, it does seem that these factors do play a larger role in the nature of the lexicon. Thus a conceit of ‘nomadic horse-riders of the steppe’ might preclude the language having an ordinary fixed expression for ‘television’. Likewise, the conceit of ‘the totally unambiguous language’ might entail that a language have a very large lexicon.
Regardless of conceit, though, the lexicon of most conlangs is likely to be of a similar size to that of natural languages: quite large. The creation of the lexicon is, then, quite a daunting task of its own – one that requires some creativity to even start the process. While there is no single, easy, ready-made ‘shortcut’, some creative lexicon-creation aids have emerged. A basic starting point is a ‘Swadesh list’ (Swadesh, 1952, 1955; see also Gudschinsky, 1956). Although the ‘list’ actually comprises several lists of varying size and was originally designed to explore genetic relationships, one of the lists (and it does not matter which) can be repurposed as a tool for creating a basic set of vocabulary: conlangers could create roots for all of the items on that list (or use the list to come up with more appropriate roots to be created). This process could be repeated with other available lists, even such as those given as aids in foreign-language textbooks.

There is also a tradition, within the conlanging community, of forcing necessity to be the mother of invention, in terms of creating lexical items. Trying to create texts in a conlang is one way in which the necessary necessity has been induced. (Creating such texts also has the added benefit of acting as a testing ground for grammatical structures.) The Tower of Babel story from the Book of Genesis is one text that many conlangers have translated, in part because of the irony involved with the outcome of the story versus the addition of a new conlang to the world. But some conlangers have taken this to an even higher level, composing lots of original texts in their language. Some even go as far as writing personal journal entries in their language – the conlang providing a line of security against any would-be readers. Another way in which lexical creation has been pursued is through word-a-day invention activities. An exemplar of this practice is Lexember, whereby a word is created for each day of December. The event, which includes posting the new word to social media, also provides conlangers and conlang aficionados a space in which to celebrate language creation.

Conlanging as art?

As the discussion in this chapter indicates, the creative process involved with conlanging has some similarities with other artistic pursuits, such as creative writing, production of visual artwork, and music composition (and, in fact, many conlangers also engage in some or all of these pursuits in addition to their conlanging). This raises the question of whether or not conlanging should be considered an art. While providing anything close to a definitive answer is outside the scope of this chapter, it is interesting to note some of the interesting differences that conlanging has from these other ‘tried and true’ artistic pursuits.

Conlanging differs most notably from the ‘tried and true’ artistic pursuits in that it seems to lack an obvious, ready-made consumable product. While books, films, plays, paintings, artwork, and albums are produced to showcase (or, to the more economically minded, sell) creative writing, the visual arts, or music, respectively, it is not entirely clear what the consumable version of a conlang should be. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that creating a constructed language is an extremely open-ended project. It is not at all clear what constitutes a complete language, and in fact a particular conlanging project can go on for years without an identifiable end point. Of course, grammars, dictionaries, and teach-yourself books have been produced, suggesting that these might be considered the consumable products of conlanging, but these items themselves give rise to another impediment to the appreciation of conlanging as an art: they, in fact, require a certain amount of specialised knowledge to be
consumed – namely, what language is. Consequently, these materials do not offer an easy point of entry on a par with music, artwork, or films, which can be experienced more readily and then interpreted by the average person. So, even if conlanging is to be considered an art, it seems as though it must be regarded as a niche creative endeavour, since its consumption is not straightforward, both in terms of the kind of end product expected and the consuming public’s ability to consume any such end product.

**Future directions**

Because the scholarly study of constructed languages is still in its infancy, many avenues of inquiry surrounding these languages are still to be explored. For linguists interested in the limits of language structure and what sorts of constraints the mind might impose on that structure, conlangs have the potential to provide some new and interesting data on the subject. While conlangs are unquestionably much more conscious creations than are natural languages, they are still languages. Furthermore, several conlangs have been created with the explicit conceit of being alien languages (Klingon and Na’vi being two well-known examples). Impressionistically, even these ‘alien’ languages seem to have a human language quality to them, raising the question of whether language creators can escape their own cognitive capabilities and biases in their creations. By exploring this and related questions, perhaps conlangs, too, can provide some insight into the faculty or faculties that underlie language.

For the more sociolinguistically minded, there are other numerous underexplored areas. While some demographic and social data has been collected by conlanger Sally Caves via informal surveys on The Conlang Mailing List and some ethnographic data on the conlanging community is provided by Okrent (2009), even a fundamental question of precisely who conlangs are and where they live is not very well understood. Further questions, such as whether conlanging affects how certain individuals establish their social/linguistic identity, whether it produces, or is produced with, certain language attitudes, or otherwise interacts with creation or maintenance of certain speech communities, are also presently underexplored. Some of the essays in Adams (2011) offer an introduction to understanding these questions, although more work remains to be done.

For scholars interested more squarely in creativity, constructed languages offer yet another area in which creative practice could be examined. As noted throughout this chapter, conlangs have several unique characteristics that distinguish them from other artistic endeavours; thus conlanging projects bring out some unique creative choices and processes (as well as some familiar ones). The ideas presented represent some preliminary views about understanding how the conlanging creative process works; doubtlessly, future work could add to, challenge, or refine these understandings.

Within the domain of conlangs themselves, the most intriguing area to watch in the future will be the use of parafictional languages in media. Having become more common in the last ten or fifteen years, it remains to be seen whether the conlanging trend will persist and become a staple of productions (at least in certain genres), or whether it will prove to be only a passing fad. It is conceivable that the way in which this pop culture aspect unfolds could very well influence the amount and rate of the study of conlangs academically. Furthermore, the use of conlangs seems to be restricted, at the present, to work within the science fiction or fantasy genres. Whether conlanging will ever be employed in other genres is also something to watch in the future.
However, the fact that some of the recent uses of conlangs in the media have occurred in fairly high-profile venues certainly seems to have raised awareness of conlanging activity. So even if the overall presence of conlangs in the media were to decrease, we might hope that this awareness will allow the activity of conlanging to escape permanently the obscurity within which it has historically lingered.

Related topics
daily language creativity; lexical creativity

Further reading

This collection of papers includes discussions of several well-known conlangs, including Tolkien’s languages, Esperanto, and Klingon.


This article looks at the role of the Internet in creating new conlanging communities and as a means of ‘publishing’ a conlang.


This book offers one of the most in-depth explorations of conlanging to date, covering the history of conlanging, as well as the author’s own experiences with the Esperanto, Klingon, and Loglan communities.


A book-length version of part of the author’s website, this book provides a framework and ideas for creating one’s own language.


This essay details Tolkien’s personal conlanging history, as well as his thoughts on how the activity of conlanging might be approached.

References


