

## “Introduction”: Conlangs and Power

MATTHEW BARTON, KYOKO KISHIMOTO, MICHAEL DANDO,  
AND SHARON COGDILL<sup>i</sup>

Constructed languages, or conlangs, have risen in popularity in the past few decades, thanks mostly to their heightened media exposure in video series and films like *Game of Thrones* (Dothraki, High Valyrian), *Avatar* (Na’vi), *Star Trek: Discovery* (Klingon), *The Expanse* (Belter), and *The Rings of Power* (Quenya, Sindarin, Dwarvish, Orkish). Indeed, even *Star Wars*, not known for being particularly concerned with scientific fidelity unlike much of sci-fi, has even developed a conlang for *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*, which feature what we might call a proto-conlang in the form of signed and voiced languages for the Tusks. Meanwhile, the popular language-learning app Duolingo offers programs in several conlangs, including High Valyrian, Dothraki, Klingon, and Sindarin as well as the historically important conlang Esperanto.

Why would anyone want to learn a conlang? Ramsey L. Cardwell, an assessment scientist who blogs for Duolingo, offers these reasons in “Why Learn a Made-Up Language?”:

1. To “connect and communicate” with other speakers at conventions and other fan events
2. To express yourself creatively: “Imagine fictional cultures and explore the possibilities of humanity’s future”
3. To develop “metalinguistic awareness,” or the “ability to consciously think about different properties of a language such as pronunciation and grammar” (Cardwell)

Also, people express their fandom of a video series, film, or book by learning and speaking a conlang (or reading one, if a conscript exists).

So far, most scholarly attention paid to conlangs is from a linguistic perspective. Some academic linguistics programs have even found that teaching conlangs is useful for attracting new students. Many popular conlangs are designed to be easier to learn than natural languages. As students of popular culture, however, we are less interested in the linguistic aspects of conlangs than in what they can teach us about power and marginalization. What roles do conlangs play in shaping our

ideology? How does learning, hearing, or speaking them influence our perceptions about the way things ought to be, both on and off the screen?

We all know that language plays a strong role in our everyday lives and is never a tool that functions simply for communication. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity,” and “as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (59). Though Anzaldúa is writing about natural languages (Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and others) and not conlangs, her point that a power imbalance is at work when the dominant group’s language is accommodated – or, in the case of sci-fi and fantasy, when the audience is accommodated by the universal use of American English – is relevant in understanding the ideological role that conlangs play in popular culture. For example, when an audience hears Belters (*The Expanse*) or Klingons (*Star Trek*) speak to each other in their languages instead of English, an argument is being conveyed that these characters have legitimacy and subject positions. A fan learning these languages might well be developing not just a “metalinguistic awareness,” but also a rhetorical awareness that their language (and the culture that produced it) is but one of many possibilities, and the choice to speak in one language rather than another may have something to do with power. Having a Klingon speak Klingon is often an important creative as well as rhetorical choice, especially in a fictional context where a “Universal Translator” exists that could easily – at least in the fictional world – render their language in English.

The world of conlangs goes far beyond conlangs created for novels, television, and films. Perhaps the most well-known is Esperanto, developed by L. L. Zamenhof (“Esperanto”). Created in 1887, Esperanto now has over a hundred organizations and two million speakers (including J. R. R. Tolkien). Intended to become an “international language” that is “politically and socially neutral,” Esperanto is classified as an “international auxiliary language” (Peterson 8). Though Esperanto has been used in many fictional works, including by a young William Shatner in *Incubus* in 1966, the conlangs that interest us here are those intended primarily for fictional purposes, often to add richness, believability, and subjectivity to a fictional people and their world. Convenient devices like *Star Trek*’s Universal Translator aside, why would we expect people from different planets to speak American English? Increasingly audiences find characters speaking gibberish as an “alien” language unsatisfactory, and studios hire a professional conlanger (usually a trained linguist) to write a language both for the characters and for the audience.

## Interview with David J. Peterson

One such conlanger is David J. Peterson, whom we interviewed for this collection. The creator of around 50 languages, Peterson is perhaps best known for his work on Dothraki and High Valyrian in *Game of Thrones* and its spin-off *The House of the Dragon*. He argues that a conlang is a language that has been “consciously created by one or more individuals in its fullest form” (emphasis on original, 18). For Peterson, “fullest form” means a language is a “fully functional linguistic system” (18). Though not all conlangs are created by trained linguists, they should (from Peterson’s perspective) be compatible with what modern linguists understand about human languages. For example, a conlang should have coherent rules for aspects of language like noun case and number, interrogatives, negation, and so on, such that someone could articulate new statements in that language in a predictable fashion. Thus, for Peterson, conlanging is compatible with the “hard science fiction” tradition, which values scientific plausibility in questions of space travel or advanced technology. Just as a hard-science-fiction audience would reject stories in which the known laws of physics are ignored, a conlanger of Peterson’s stamp would likewise reject stories in which an “alien language” violates well-established principles of linguistics.

However, just as not all great science fiction is hard science fiction, conlangs that are not “fully functional” in the linguistics sense also have a place. In fact, unlike J. R. R. Tolkien’s writings about Middle-earth, many books that have a version of a conlang in them – like Edgar Rice Burroughs (in his *Barsoom* series), Ursula Le Guin, George R. R. Martin, and James S. A. Corey (pen name for Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck) – do not have fully functional languages, especially a grammar, but they do have the beginnings of a vocabulary, which is often just nouns. Not all of even Tolkien’s conlangs are completely worked out, and Peterson himself has a con-sign-lang for the Atrides in *Dune* that is not a full conlang.

In our interview, we asked professional conlanger David J. Peterson to talk more about the role of conlangers in video series and films, the relationship between conlangs and culture (or worldbuilding), and conlangs and conscripts in different shows as well as whether they should be copyrighted or not. Conlangers may find themselves at odds with producers or authors who insist the language should sound “foreign” or “harsh,” Peterson says, but he considers conlanging an art and believes conlangers should have as much control over the process of creating and

implementing a conlang as possible (Peterson “Interview”). He describes his inspirations and methods for creating conlangs and conscripts and the impact his and similar work has made on popular culture. For Peterson, although we do not commonly talk about how important it is, the quality of a conlang depends on “how much the language creator knows about language and creation, what their intent is, and their context and purpose for creating it” (Peterson “Interview”). He also discusses the many challenges he has faced because of the realities of television and film production, where he often works with actors, producers, and other writers with limited time and resources. He talks candidly about working on the conlangs for *Game of Thrones*, *Defiance*, *Vampire Academy*, *Star-Crossed*, and *The 100* – and even how *Star Wars* handles languages. He also gives us details about what Tolkien, Marc Okrand (Klingon), and George R. R. Martin did well and badly and what they did and didn’t care about.

### The “Conlanger Test”

Further, as with language, conlangs go beyond being means of communication and expression into the territories of socio-linguistics and rhetoric. Used in a way that locates them in a culture, they can challenge the power difference among groups and reveal the power relations between languages, race, and groups. For us, the ontological question of whether this or that conlang is somehow a “true” or fully developed one is not very interesting. What is fascinating, though, is how a conlang *functions* in the narrative and how power and marginalization are shaped by how it is used. Tusken, for example, is not a full language, but how it functions is extremely important to the video series it appears in. What we have found is that depending on how they are deployed and interpreted, conlangs can challenge or reinforce hegemonies, not just for groups of speakers within a fictional setting but to the actual world of the audience.

The 1985 Bechdel-Wallace test for the validity of female characters in films was designed to expose structural misogyny. It was translated for race by Nimesh Shukla (Bechdel, Latif). Recently Ava DuVernay and sisters Nadia Latif and Laila Latif developed separate sets of questions that look more deeply into structural racism in film and video series (Latif, DuVernay). Our Conlanger Test is built on these earlier tests that critique the way Others are written into the artifacts of popular culture, focusing in our case on cultural artifacts that have conlangs. Like the earlier tests for misogyny and racism, our test hopes to reveal systemic forces

at work in the fictional cultures that have conlangs and in the world we live in. Looking at those characters who have the conlang, then:

1. Do some of them have names?
2. Are any of them individuated?
3. Do any of them talk to each other in that conlang, and are we able to understand them?
4. What do they talk about? Do characters speak to each other in the conlang about anything other than the dominant species? Do they, for example, have normal conversations about their own people and things in their culture?
5. How is their literacy understood? Does a conscript exist? A writing system is not necessary, of course, but if one is present, is it used to communicate within the conlang community or does it only provide historical or cultural context? Is it a “flavor conscript” (Schreyer “Constructed”) to give the idea of another world and culture or an actual, fully realized constructed written language? (Schreyer “Interview” )
6. How often is the conlang spoken? Is it being used to “set the scene,” or is it used throughout? (Schreyer “Interview” )
7. Do we see subjectivity for any of those individuals and for the group itself? That is, do we see anything from their point of view? If so, how is that done? With camera focus, with language, with the development of empathy in the audience?
8. Are we shown any social structures, like family units?
9. Are we shown their everyday lives, like cooking, sleeping or just hanging out?
10. Are we shown a culture for those characters that suggests they have a history and a spirituality?
11. Do they get to tell their story in their own voice? Do we hear or see their unmediated language? (Mediations might be, e.g., C-3PO or another character, the Universal Translator.)
12. Is there evidence that the conlang was developed from the languages and cultures of marginalized people? If so, does it appear that vocabulary, grammatical structures, phonemes, etc., from historically underrepresented groups were borrowed ethically?
13. Do these beings “fulfill harmful, simplistic, or down-right racist stereotypes”? (DuVernay)

14. If the artifact is a film or video series, are marginalized people included in the production team?

This list of questions is not a taxonomy to define successful representation of Other or even to evaluate a conlang. (A *no* answer does not guarantee that the conlang is racist or misogynist and a *yes* answer does not guarantee a progressive stamp of approval.) Our attempt is to reveal the ways power differentials might be working in the book, film or series that might be difficult to see clearly without understanding how those differentials work in the outside world. It describes, based on our analysis of them, what makes for example the Klingons have subject positions in *Discovery* (see Barton, et al., in this issue) or the Tusks seem like a people in *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*.

The Conlanger Test – or the Conlanger Cultural Artifact Test, Schreyer’s suggested title – which helps us analyze the *function* of conlangs, serves as a beginning point to understanding the power dynamics at work in fictions with conlangs. All these tests expose problematic practices and systemic racism or misogyny in the real world. Rather than stopping with whether the representation is good or bad, we need to look at structural issues such as how the representations perpetuate hegemony or justify colonization. Otherwise, we risk reverting to the practices Edward Said criticizes, conceiving of and representing other, non-human cultures in ways that are just reframed versions of colonial discourse, like the familiar tropes of the frontier saloon, the White Savior, and the open marketplace as well as, for example, appropriating indigenous cultures and languages “for the purposes of control and external dominion” rather than “coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons” (Said iv).

## Interview with Christine Schreyer

We are interested in how fans use conlangs and what their actions reveal about power relations in the real world and asked Christine Schreyer, who is a scholar and a language creator, to talk about how she sees fans’ engagement with conlangs. She researches revitalization of indigenous languages and has also studied conlangs, especially Na’vi, its fans and their language use. Referencing the work of Mark Duffett, she discusses how studying conlangs and fandoms can reveal insights into the operation of power within and beyond popular culture. Speakers of conlangs use them not only to participate in a fandom but also to bring aspects of that fandom into their own lives and society. For example, her work has shown

that Na'vi learners have been led to embrace environmentalism in their real lives. We showed Schreyer a version of our Conlanger Test as part of our interview with her and based on her extensive knowledge of conlangs and their use in social contexts, her response was to suggest modifications in order to delve more deeply into cultural artifacts and practices around them. She influenced the current version of the test, pointing out an unconscious orality bias and helping us flesh out the questions around cultural practices. Our current Conlanger Test cites Schreyer's interview where her suggestions make it more generally applicable and useful. (In her interview, Schreyer applies an earlier draft of our test to Na'vi, demonstrating its potential usefulness for analyses of identity and subjectivity.)

### The Essays in This Issue

Others in this issue also think about the way a conlang can construct subjectivity and influence how readers, viewers, and fans are brought into the fictional world. Parvathy Rajendran and Andrew Korah's "Power through Othering: How Conlangs Find Value within Narratives" explores how fictional languages can take part in the building of, or the challenging of, power structures by comparing the *Earthsea* novels of Ursula K. Le Guin to Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* series and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. They make the argument that Ancient Language was "simply the placeholder for power itself" in *Eragon*, and Tolkien "intently positions the development of his conlangs within the narrative history of Middle-earth." In contrast, Le Guin's fictional language "disrupts [...] assumptions of ancient languages by intentionally subverting several tropes of fantasy fiction" and "welcomes and celebrates ambiguity and disruptions of societal norms." Fictional languages like Le Guin's Old Speech can both build up or break down social dynamics like gender roles within the narrative world but also "create a network of subjective and objective positions and related hierarchies" that readers can then apply to enrich their understanding of language, culture, and power in the real world.

When analyzing conlangs, some scholars may focus only on the fictional world and follow how a language evolves along with its speakers. Famously, J. R. R. Tolkien was a "language creator before he penned his major works" and "understood that language itself is inseparable from the culture that produces it" (Peterson 9). As a philologist and someone well versed in linguistics, Tolkien saw clearly that languages evolve over time as members of language families. Many

linguistic changes depend on political events in “the real world” like contact between two groups of people speaking different languages or colonization. (The British colonization project and the American practice of chattel slavery of the 19th century have influenced all of us in how we understand racialization.) Tolkien addresses race in his works, almost always in minute individual moments, and as an inheritor of Victorian terminology, his use of the word *race* includes ideas of families and clans, and their languages. Maria Beatrice Brancati, Giulia De Marchi, and Bogdan Groza’s “The Linguistic Shifts in Tolkien’s Elvish Languages from a Socio-political Lens” focuses on the internal world of the fiction, treating it as if it were real. Their analysis is a technical description of the shifts in the Elvish languages, with some attention to how internal socio-political forces in the narrative influence those shifts. Brancati et al. do not get into an analysis of how the conlang functions in the fiction (even as an index to the political and social well-being of its speakers among groups in the fictional world). This essay, however, analyzes the representation of the development of a sophisticated conlang in fiction.

As it has almost from the beginning, *Star Trek* continues to play a key role in the establishment and rising popularity of conlangs. While Klingon gets most of the attention, several episodes of all the various incarnations of the franchise have explored the role of language and culture in various ways. Addressing a key episode in the *Next Generation* series, Craig A. Meyer, in “Shaka, When the Walls Fell: Conlangs, Metaphors and (Mis)Communication,” makes an argument that even though a fictional language may not technically be a fully-fledged conlang, metaphors can make it function as one. Early *Trek* typically relies on the Universal Translator (UT) to elide the problems and problematics of language. However, in this episode, the UT seems to fail; while it transliterates the Tamarian language, the result is a series of metaphors that baffle the crew of the *Enterprise*. Meyer shows that as Picard and Dathon struggle to overcome this seeming limitation of the UT, they gain a better understanding of the metaphorical nature of language and why learning someone’s mythology is as important as their syllabary.

Matt Barton, Kyoko Kishimoto, Ed M. Sadrai, Mike Dando, and Sharon Cogdill explore the Klingon conlang as a means of giving subjectivity to Klingons in “‘They Are Coming’: Klingon Subjectivity and Critique of the Federation in *Star Trek: Discovery*.” The strategic use of Klingon and conscripts in the first season of *Discovery* helps the viewers see the world from the Klingons’ perspective and get a glimpse into the diversity within the Klingon clans including the different visions they have for their future, which ultimately reveals the oppressive and



assimilationist power of the Federation. Klingon subjectivity – through the use of conlangs and conscripts – pushes us to imagine what a more just world may look (and sound) like in the real world. We argue that while it is important to analyze the ways power works in popular-culture artifacts like *Discovery*, we must go beyond a power analysis for its own sake – our attention must go beyond the artifact into the progressive restructuring of power in our society. Critiquing the problems of society is the first step. But we also need to imagine what society could look like and most importantly to think about the ways to get there. The fully developed conlangs and conscripts in *Discovery* disrupt the narrative of a United Federation and present deeper and more sophisticated Klingons than we have ever seen before.

John Paul Walter, Kyoko Kishimoto, Matt Barton, and Sharon Cogdill summarize the complex ways in which conlangs, race and power interact in J. R. R. Tolkien’s novels as well as in the adaptations – including games – in “Opinion: Tolkien and Race (The Primary-source Accounts) and the Adaptations.”

Finally, Matt Barton reviews David J. Peterson’s *The Art of Language Invention: From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves to Sand Worms, the Words Behind World-Building*. While the book is intended mostly for aspiring conlangers, Peterson’s experience working with authors and studios is invaluable for popular-culture critics.

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<sup>i</sup> This interdisciplinary team of editors and writers (we call ourselves the Khanlangers) includes scholars who share a deep interest in and passion for critical analyses of popular culture as well as having specializations in linguistics, culturally relevant pedagogy, ethnic studies, rhetoric and literature. Recent relevant publications include “*Welwala* at the Borders: Language, Space, and Power in *The Expanse*” (2023) and ““Am I Real?": Hybridity, Multiplicity, and Self-Actualization in *Star Trek: Picard*” (2021); as well as conference presentations: “The Queen Speaks English: The Universal Translator, Hybridity, and ConLangs in *Star Trek*” (2020); “Elvish, Belter, Dothraki, Klingon, and Wakandan: ConLangs, Superfans, and Rhetoric” (2019); “Constructing Languages for Fantasy and Fiction” (2018).

MATTHEW BARTON is a professor of English at St. Cloud State University. His research interests include rhetoric, popular culture, and professional communication. He is the author of *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (2019) and four other books on video game history and culture in addition to articles in *Computers & Composition*, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, and *Game Studies*. He also produces *Matt Chat*, a YouTube series featuring interviews with notables from the games industry.

KYOKO KISHIMOTO is a Professor of Ethnic Studies in the Department of Ethnic, Gender, & Women’s Studies at St. Cloud State University. Her research interests include how to incorporate antiracist pedagogy within and beyond the classroom, women of color in higher education, and popular cultural representations of race. Her recent works include “Beyond Teaching Racial Content: Antiracist Pedagogy as Implementing Antiracist Practices” (2022), “The Impact of Language Brokering on Hmong College Students’ Parent-Child Relationship and Academic Persistence” (2019), and “Anti-Racist Pedagogy: From Faculty’s Self-Reflection to Organizing Within and Beyond the Classroom” (2018). Her work has also appeared in *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, *Multicultural Education*, *Feminist Teacher*, and other publications.

MICHAEL DANDO is an Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Literature in the Department of English at St. Cloud State University. His research interests include culturally relevant pedagogy, and the intersections of popular culture and critical theory. Particularly, his research examines ways youth employ various cultural forms, including Afrofuturism, hip-hop culture, and comic books to create social, cultural, and political identities that generate educational opportunities for sustained, critical, democratic engagement for social justice. His work has been featured in various academic journals including *Kappa Delta Pi Record* and *Learning, Media and Technology*.

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SHARON COGDILL is Professor Emerita of English at St. Cloud State University. Her research interests focus on 19<sup>th</sup>-century British popular culture, especially newspaper reportage of social events. Recent projects: Paper (in plenary panel): “Led by the Queens: In Costume, Women as Arbiters of Cultural, Social and Political Power” (MVSA 2023); ““As it was not ungrammatical, though of a chatty tendency, it seemed to please”: Lady Violet Greville, ‘Aristocratic Lady Journalist’ of the 1890s” (2017); “Unparalleled Magnificence and Splendour”: The *Morning Post* and the Duchess of Devonshire’s Fancy-dress Ball, July 1897” (2016); “For Isis and England: The Golden Dawn as a Social Network” (2015); *Social Victorians*, [en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Social\\_Victorians](https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Social_Victorians); and especially *Devonshire House Fancy Dress Ball, 2 July 1897*, [en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Social\\_Victorians/1897\\_Fancy\\_Dress\\_Ball](https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Social_Victorians/1897_Fancy_Dress_Ball).