# Interview with David Peterson

In this interview, we delve into Peterson's process of creating languages, the challenges he has faced, and the impact his work has made on popular culture. From his early fascination with language to his involvement in the creation of languages for major television shows and films, Peterson has a wealth of knowledge to share about the art of language creation and its role in shaping our entertainment landscape. This interview is an insightful exploration of the intersection of linguistics and popular culture, as seen through the eyes of one of its most accomplished practitioners.

In one place we supplement this interview with Peterson's *The Art of Language Invention* to answer a question particularly important to us in this special issue of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*.

## What are Conlangs?

**Editors**: We've noticed that many conlangs, including the more popular ones, weren't created completely from scratch. For example, the con-creole Belter borrows from many real-world languages, as we would expect, given that it's a creole, including Polish, Persian, and Zulu. A conlanger may have studied existing languages like Arabic and admits being influenced by them when creating their conlang. Sometimes non-western languages seem to be borrowed more frequently than others when constructing languages, perhaps due to how different they sound from English.

DAVID J. PETERSON is the creator of around 50 constructed languages — including Dothraki, 3 versions of Valyrian and 5 others for the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, Trigedasleng for the CW show *The 100*, Shiväisith for Marvel's *Thor: The Dark World*, and many others. Peterson, who earned his MA in linguistics from University of California, San Diego, has been a prominent figure in the conlanger community for more than two decades. He produced a YouTube series and wrote the book *The Art of Language Invention: From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves to Sand Worms, the Words Behind World-Building* (2015) to assist other conlangers in inventing new languages and to provide an insider's view of conlang culture. He was executive producer on the documentary film *Conlanging: The Art of Crafting Tongues* (2017) and wrote *Create Your Own Secret Language: Invent Codes, Ciphers, Hidden Messages, and More* (2020). He also created and expanded Duolingo's curriculum in High Valyrian.

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**David Peterson**: Let’s start off with some definitions. First of all, a conlang is just a constructed language, and that’s a top-level term. Some terms underneath that can be, I think, a bit more useful.

All languages have been constructed by humans, as far as we know. But conlangs are intentionally constructed whereas natural languages, despite our best efforts, are unintentionally constructed and then carried on. Certainly, history is rife with attempts by individuals or organizations to try to control a natural language or to change its course, and they usually meet with varying levels of success – usually not very successful.

Constructed languages can be subdivided in many ways. The best way is by intent, but other ways exist. First, you can divide between what we call *a posteriori* and *a priori* languages.

An *a posteriori* language is one that is built from other languages intentionally, usually because of the intent of the language. One of the more famous examples within the conlang community is Brithenig, an alternate history project, complete with a full alternate history timeline, where Andrew Smith’s idea was, “What if speakers of Latin remained on the British Isles? What might have happened had the language stayed there, but undergone some of the sound changes that happened with P. Celtic?” And so he applied those sound changes to Latin to produce a new Romance language that looked and sounded like a Celtic language.

Other conlangers liked the idea and the spirit of this project and so joined in Smith’s shared world. Another famous conlang, Ill Bethisad, is Wenedyk by Jan van Steenbergen. It’s another romance language but imagining if Polish sound changes had applied to Latin. These are examples of *a posteriori* conlangs, and in the case of III Bethisad, all the words, all of the grammar, come from Latin. They don't do so by accident or because the creators happen to like Latin. The creators used Latin on purpose because it made sense for the backstory of the language.

Aside from *a posteriori* conlangs there are also *a priori* conlangs, where all the conlang’s grammar and words are original. The conlang might show slight influences here and there, with maybe even a favorite word borrowed in from an existing language, but ninety-nine percent of the grammar and ninety-nine percent of the vocabulary of an *a priori* conlang is completely original and obeys all the rules that the conlanger themselves created regardless of any other language.

## Conlang Quality

**David**: Now with that understanding, of course, things also happen slightly in between, either intentionally or unintentionally, getting to a different question that's rarely engaged with both in the community and outside of the community, and that's quality. Creating a language creates an art form like any others, and so, even though it's subjective, some examples are better and some are worse. And you'll see a lot of rather sophomoric examples if you poke around the Internet just on the big communities usually by people starting out who will say things like, "Yeah, I created this language, and it's got a little bit of Japanese and a little bit of Finnish and a little bit of Welsh, because I like these things, but then I kind of did some other things with it." And of course, they're usually L1 English speakers, and if you start to really dig into the language, you'll see that a lot of the finer points end up relying on English, not intentionally, but rather unintentionally, because they didn't know any better. What you end up with is a mish mash of an *a posteriori* and *a priori* language because the language itself is purposeless or has more than one intended purpose. "So, this language is just for me, and only because I like it. But then I also have a *Dungeons & Dragons* world, and it's going to work with that, and I also want to use it around the house, and I'm also trying to make it like a naturalistic conlang, but also not doing that." And so it's just a Frankenstein disaster with a lot of unintentionally poor decisions baked into the language.

## Tolkien

**David**: Before the conlang community existed, there wasn't a lot of conscious thought put into the making of the conlang. For example, if you look at Tolkien's languages, we would call them *a priori* because they consist of mostly original vocabulary and grammar. They even have sound changes, but they don't adhere to the standards of a modern strictly *a priori* naturalistic language. Tolkien really liked the aesthetics of Finnish and Welsh specifically and so would put things in that were reminiscent of those languages to him, and sometimes even individual words, which is not something that a modern language creator would do – or at least not without reflection – unless they were a beginner. Because nowadays we are aware that this is a thing that you can do. It's a choice that can be made. And the idea is that if you're the artist, you should be in charge of as many choices that affect your work as possible, so that the work that you're creating is wholly yours. We don't say anymore, "Oh, this is that way, because I forgot about it, or didn't think about it."

## Marc Okrand

**David**: A distinction, I think, needs to be drawn between people who create languages because they enjoy it, they've learned about it, they've studied other created languages, and they more or less know what they're doing versus those who are creating a language for the first time. For example, take Marc Okrand and Klingon. He just happened to be in LA working on the Academy Awards, doing the closed captioning. He was working in the same studio where they were working on *Star Trek II.* The producers needed some Vulcan lines, and since he was there, he helped out with it.

Of course, he was a linguist and had studied Klamath, I believe, and earned his Ph.D. by producing a grammar of the Mutsun language at UC Berkeley. However, he made a lot of choices that were made without reflection because he wasn't aware of the work of other language creators, except maybe Tolkien and Zamenhof. So he made choices as he saw fit. Since he enjoyed Klamath and had worked on it, he incorporated it into Klingon via its system of personal agreement (i.e., verbal concord), simply because he liked it. He also tried to make it intentionally alien by subverting linguistic universals, but not necessarily according to the linguistic understanding of why those linguistic universals are the way they are. And certainly not without the modern understanding that universals should be taken with a grain of salt, especially with respect to conlanging, because, after all, just because this is the way most things are, it's not necessarily the way that they always are, and some implicational universals are not necessarily as strong as we believed them to be in the 1980s.

## Writing Conlangs for Pre-Existing Works

**David**: The quality of a conlang depends largely on how much the language creator knows about language creation, what their intent is, and their context and purpose for creating it.

Studying the most popular created languages is also problematic. It's not studying original languages in the sense that a language creator sat down and came up with the idea for the language and created the people who speak this language. After all, the Klingons existed before Klingon, the Dothraki existed before

Dothraki, and a lot of choices about the languages were made by the authors of the stories the conlangs appear in – and in some cases made rather badly. And so the language creator is in a position to say, well, all right, am I creating a language that reflects this work that exists? In other words, I've been hired to create a language for this. Am I going to do that, or am I going to do something that I think is better, that maybe doesn't fit? It's rather like being between a rock and a hard place. Either you honor a poor choice made by an author or TV writers and produce a conlang that isn't quite as good as it might have been, or you disregard the poorly created bits and create something that's good but doesn't perfectly reflect the speakers that already exist. Many language creators – myself included – err on the side of the established canon, since this is what readers or viewers will want and expect. Since one is being hired to do a job, one should do the job, whether the results are ideal or not.

## Appropriating Cultures and Signifiers

**Editors**: What are some ways to think about people's desire to borrow other cultures' languages and the implications of appropriating other cultures' languages and signifiers and cultural stereotyping? What should an ethical conlanger do to address the power differences behind borrowing languages and the unconscious biases that are attached to the cultures?

Peterson's *The Art of Language Invention*: Sometimes the people involved in a show will want a conlang to sound harsh or guttural to imply primitive or warlike characteristics of the culture of the speakers, as with Klingon. Peterson notes that certain sounds like [x] tends to sound harsh to English speakers (like the *ch* in Bach). However, similar sounds exist in Spanish and French, languages that are seldom thought of as being guttural. "In addition to the history of cultural stereotyping," Peterson writes, "it's the comparison of entire sound systems that produces a phonaesthetic character in the mind of the listener" (26). "German may sound harsh to an American English speaker," for instance, "but might not to a Dutch speaker from the Netherlands" (26). To create a "guttural" conlang, "A conlanger can use the expectations of their users/hearers to achieve a particular phonaesthetic effect" (26). Of course, problems arise if those expectations of the users/hearers reinforce negative stereotypes. While natural languages may provide some guidance, "It's up to the conlanger to choose the sounds for their language" (46). An argument can be made that "guttural" or "harsh" descriptors, or "musical" or "singsong," would only be applied externally; the actual speakers may well feel the opposite, and there is no linguistic evidence that natural languages mirror culture. A ready example is the "Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax" that asserts Inuit people have fifty different words for snow; a concept thoroughly debunked, and Peterson argues that these and other preconceptions about the supposed links between a language and its culture are a "by-product of cultural stereotyping" and do not reflect sound linguistics. Nevertheless, a conlanger may find themselves at odds with producers or authors who insist the language should sound "foreign" or "harsh."

"It's a difficult thing in conlanging to transcend the limitations of one's native language, or the other languages one has studied" Peterson writes, especially the "invisible aspects of language that operate beneath the surface" (217). In addition to linguistic features like negation and topicalization, to what extent a more general unconscious cultural bias plays a role is worth exploring.

## People in Socio-Political and Family Contexts

**Editors**: It looks like you're one of the conlangers who think about a culture when you think about developing a language, that people are in socio-political and family contexts. We're really struck by how steeped in the past Tolkien's whole project is, for example. It's about how the past – including its languages – leads to the present. So, I wonder if you'd say more about the cultures the way you think about them. We've looked at several shows where you've done interesting work with languages that engage context, like *Game of Thrones* and especially with *Defiance* where you had some say. It looks like you're conscious of that, it's something that you work with, and maybe you see it as part of the art. It's really more than just work made for hire, more than just filling in a blank. Would you like to take this further, to say more?

**David**: Totally apart from my involvement with them, none of the shows that I've worked on would have been shows that I was very excited about, shall we say? One I wasn't really excited about until I saw it – *Penny Dreadful* – was, I think, the best thing that I've worked on, and it's something that, had I not been involved with it at all, I really would have found to be quite good. The other one that I was excited about till I heard the spell-out of it was *Emerald City*.

I was a really big fan of the *Oz* books growing up, and I thought it was very interesting that, especially now, a lot of fantasy is steeped in European traditions, a European past. For twenty years or so, a lot of people have been saying, "Well, why don't we do fantasy steeped in other traditions?" which is really cool. Or problematic, depending on the execution. So you see fantasy obviously set in China, Japan, and other places like that, and we have very little that is uniquely American. And *Oz*, with all its warts and lumps, is uniquely American, and I always found that really interesting. Thus, I was very excited for about thirty seconds when I was on this phone call about an adaptation of the *Oz* books, and I was like, "Finally, somebody is going to get it right!" Because I'm not a fan of the Judy Garland film. I'm not a fan of any adaptation of the *Oz* series so far. And then I heard, "Yeah, we're going to take, like, the *Wizard of Oz*, but it's going to be, like, through a *dark* lens!" and I'm like, "Oh, God! Not this again. Not the dark lens…" It was very disappointing, because I would love to see an awesome adaptation that had the unique hope and optimism, and also the aesthetics from around the turn of the century like the pioneering French film-maker Georges Méliès, I thought that would be really cool. Then they could leave the every-single-character-has-a-dark-twist to the 1990s where it belongs.

But with all the projects that I work on, the vast majority aren't things I would have read or shows I would have watched. When it comes to something like *Game of Thrones*, this is a world that's set up, and I see it, and I see the way it's set up and can evaluate it. George R. R. Martin did some things very, very well, one of which was his – not necessarily the linguistic instantiation – but the way that languages are discussed. Language is represented more accurately in that book than, I think, in any other fantasy book I've seen. He actively acknowledges that there are language families, for example, that languages can be related. Not only that, the characters in his book, being people of the day, speak about language in unsophisticated ways, but in ways that reflected language change. George R. R. Martin demonstrates this kind of thing all over the place. He even does it with nomenclature, like naming conventions in Westeros that I think are very neat. And so I thought that was really cool. But then when it comes to world building, if you just look at the kind of plants and animals that exist in various parts of the world it's almost preposterous. These things shouldn't exist here, like a predator that requires an entirely different environment. And so then, as you're sitting down to create the language, when it comes to the question, "Will there be this kind of an animal, and, moreover, a native word for it?" The answer has to be, "Well, probably, even though it doesn't necessarily make sense for the environment." And so, well, what if they just have tigers here? For some reason they've got tigers and lions, and they're just roaming around with elephants and horses and cows. And so, if that's the world, what are you doing trying to create something realistic? What does it *mean* to create something realistic for a world like that?

## Socio-Political Environment

**Editors**: Let's talk about socio-political environment. We loved *Defianc*e when it aired! It's a wonderful project. We're deeply entrenched in the politics of Pop Culture, and *Defiance* takes place in a socio-political environment. It's funny because one of us lived in St. Louis during its original run and lived near the arch, saw it, and saw it all blown up. And so we see the social and the political mapped onto the linguistic. And is that something that you've considered? A pronunciation in one of Tolkien's conlangs was the preferred one because, in a backstory he wrote, the king liked it better, because it reminded him of his mom, which we think is really interesting. How do you reconcile the political environment with the linguistic environment when you're creating a language?

**David**: It's very difficult, because these go hand-in-hand with basic cultural questions. The answer is, just how tied into the culture am I? How much do I know about it? How much agency do I have? So, with something like *Game of Thrones*, I feel pretty good about being able to add to and expand the Dothraki culture, because it's presented very clearly. And I feel like, basically, George R. R. Martin doesn't necessarily care about some things. Not that he wouldn't have something to say, but the story isn't going there, and I know that he doesn't mind me expanding it with the language in that way. I try to stay away from certain areas, because I feel like he might have something to say, and his input might differ from mine. Where our opinions differ, his is paramount, as the world is his, so on those matters I will hold off. That's been most difficult with High Valyrian, since it is the language of a destroyed culture that, in the context of the books, we see very little bits of, and it feels like some of what he is holding back is important to the plot and might be revealed later. And so I wouldn't want to create something that I had to overwrite because it was countermanded, I guess. After all, he is the ultimate authority.

So that makes certain things difficult, especially with the very recent phenomenon of people actually being interested in the language because they want to know more about the culture for very sensible reasons. For example, they want to talk about things like days of the week, months of the year, and other things like that, where I have very intentionally left the area blank, because I don't really know what he would want to do with that. And of course, as he's grown more and more famous, he's been less and less responsive. I used to be able to email him about things, and he used to send me nice responses. Now, it's hard to get a hold of him, and I understand that.

## *Defiance*

**David**: *Defiance* was a really interesting project, because I did have a lot of input, but at the same time, there were positives, and there were negatives – specifically, my voice was valued very much as a team member, but it was not valued more than any other team member, necessarily. And I remember one big bit of ret-conning [revising that affects how things in the show had been understood] happened where it kind of changed things in an important way for me, in terms of which aliens were on which planets, before the solar system was destroyed. I talked to Kevin Murphy about this. I said, hey, we've actually established this in the lore, and I was basing a lot of things on this. But what he said was, "It was a great line." It's hard to say no to that, and at the same time, I couldn't push too hard because the extraordinary level of freedom and input I was given meant that I had to be a part of the team. And in this case, the leader of that team was saying, "You know what? I like this better for what we're doing for the overall vision." So you just have to go with it.

My involvement in the culture also depends on how the story works and where it goes. One of the problems with a language like Dothraki is that the people who speak it are generally in the same dialect group, using the same idiolect**,** with roughly the same level of prestige. Very little chance to display social differences. It was nice to be able to show Daenerys learning Dothraki – that was really cool – but for the most part the other people speaking Dothraki were Khals or warriors, which doesn't give you a lot of opportunity to display diversity. Even so, George R. R. Martin's books have enough anthropological material to let you guess at other things, even if it doesn't show up in the show.

## *Vampire Academy*

**David**: On the other hand, very recently Jessie Sams (now Jessie Peterson) and I created the language for *Vampire Academy*, and we're very proud of it. But the sociopolitical question remains: How is the language used? And then, honestly, after watching the show, I have the same question. It's just not clear at all. But because of the way they're approaching the show, which isn't super realistic, the answer isn't really important. A lot of things are done for effect and for style, and when the question of how specifically this works comes up, it's like, "Who cares? Sexy vampires on the screen!" – just watch that. So, every so often when the writers want something old style or want to show off how sexy vampire-y they are, they have them say something. It's totally unclear who originated the language or what's happening with the characters' accents. How the language perpetuates is totally unclear, and so we're not going to be able to delve into those issues if we're working within that world.

**Editors**: The tone and tenor of what *Vampire Academy* is trying to accomplish, and how language maps into that, are different from something very political like *Dune*. Yes, it's got giant worms in it, but it's tracing a certain political trajectory. We think even *Defiance* is political. The *Vampire Academy* less so, but still language is important! And when you're thinking about how you're creating those languages, even if it's just sexy vampires, do you think, "I'm going to make some choices" versus "okay, well, I actually think about the entire lineage of this one guy"? Is that something that affects your decision making or the team's decision making?

**David**: Especially when it comes to adaptive works, it can be very difficult. George R. R. Martin's work was a lot easier because at least in terms of language, it has a lot of what I would hope for in adapting a work. It's not necessarily the linguistic elements, they weren't necessarily very interesting, or at least they don't really push beyond the bounds of what we see in Western European languages. But at least they're consistent, and they make sense, which is way more important than anything else. And then you come to a work like *The Witcher*, which is… It has to be one of the worst things ever conceived. Okay, I guess people enjoy it, but goodness gracious, it's convoluted. Rather than doing research to build a consistent world, things appear to have been grabbed haphazardly from various cultures, languages, etc., and thrown together with no concern as to the sense of it. Unlike something that's supposed to present as random and off-the-wall, like *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* or *Xavier: Renegade Angel*, *The Witcher* is supposed to present as a serious, "high fantasy" work. It's supposed to *look* like *A Song of Ice and Fire* without resting on the type of research that went into producing *A Song of Ice and*

*Fire*. To the extent that a reader doesn't care about that, it's successful. Taking a peek under the hood at all, though, reveals a sloppy mess – and the "language" is the worst part of it.

## *The 100*

**Editors**: Yes, what about *The 100*?

**David**: *The 100* was based on sample chapters of the book, which was forthcoming. It was pitched that way. Honestly that's the way it was and I think it still is in Hollywood: "I have this original idea, and it's this and this and this," and they're like, "No, sorry." But if you say, "I have this idea, and it's exactly the same, but if it's based on one sentence that some famous author wrote," they're like, "Yes, let's do it! We'll put their name all over!" And there was never any chance that the stories were going to be anything alike because the material still hadn't been written. But when I was on *The 100,* I had just finished working on an original series called *Star-Crossed* and *The 100* aired its first season. At the same time the CW was only going to pick up a certain number of these shows because it debuted a whole bunch at the same time: *The Tomorrow People, The 100, Star-Crossed, Reign*… All of these came out at the same time, and everybody thought that *The Tomorrow People* would end up getting renewed. Everybody knew that *Star-Crossed* was going to get canceled because the network hated it. And I knew this because the *Defiance* writer's room was above the *Star-Crossed* writer's room, and the conversations could be heard through the floor, and the writers on both series would chat with each other at lunch. The *Star-Crossed* writers were so miserable because they'd be like, "We have this cool idea," and then they'd get on the phone with the executives, who would be like, "Get all this sci-fi garbage out of this show! Put in more romance! This is not what we want from this!" And they were pulling the purse strings tight and everything, so the *Star-Crossed* writers were having a miserable time of it. So basically, that show was never going to be picked up.

*The 100* was a surprise pickup. When the CW renewed *The 100,* a high-level executive named Mark Pedowitz basically in a nice way kind of told them, "There's this guy that created a language for *Star-Crossed*! It'd be so cool if the people that were on the Ground spoke their own language, don't you think?" This was not part of the original idea. The writers of *The 100* had no idea how it could work when they called me up to invite me on to the show. Rather than them telling me what I was gonna do, they were asking me, “Is there some way that you can create a language that works with this?” And of course, I looked at what they had done, and once I watched the entire first season, and saw that the Grounders were already speaking English, I couldn’t think of any logical reason why a new language should be created for the show. I tried my best to use sci-fi magic to explain how on earth this language that evolved from English could be spoken by people who also spoke fluent English. It doesn’t make any sense linguistically. Then I presented the language I made to them – my best attempt at creating something that was somewhat plausible – and they're like, “You’ve got to make it sound more like English!” So now this thing is going to sound even more like English for these people that already speak English. This doesn’t make any sense, but nevertheless, I dialed it back a little bit. I came up with what ended up being Trigedasleng, or Grounder, and it’s used in season two. It was attached to a group of people led by a character, Lexa, that the lesbian and bisexual community fell in love with. And so suddenly I had a popular language. While beforehand nobody had taken up Dothraki, people wanted to learn Trigedasleng. And honestly for me it was a really positive experience until the seventh episode of season 3 where they killed Lexa with a stray bullet – right after she and Clarke, the main character of the show, had consummated their lesbian relationship, the show basically killed the fandom. And then the show went on for another four seasons.

If you look up *Clexa*, which was the name of the ship [a *ship*, short for relationship, is the name of a fandom for a relationship in a work of fiction], you’ll see some articles from around the time about how basically the show did something really, really stupid. And then the show runner made things even worse, and the writers made things even worse, because of course they did. And so, a lot of people who *were* big fans of the show kept on and formed a community around the study of Trigedasleng, despite the fact that they had completely stopped watching the show. But they loved the idea, and they loved Lexa and Clarke’s relationship, and they wanted to keep kind of going with it in some way but couldn’t stand to watch the show. So, they just started learning and using the language. And since it was based on English, it was all *a posteriori*. They could actually develop their own vocabulary, which they did, and they started using it. This was the first time that that ever happened for me, after I had basically given up on the idea of any of my languages ever becoming popular.

## Owning and Controlling the Languages

**Editors**: We had a question related to that. Clearly a tension exists between the conlang creator and the producers of a show asking the linguist to conform to their ideas. We’ve heard interviews where the writers of the conlang had to make ridiculous choices, like making up words that don’t make sense to fit what the producers wanted or having the sound played backwards, but then in your case with *Defiance*, you had a lot more say in developing the languages. Do you think that, in the case where the linguist had a lot more say in constructing the language, should they be valued more, and should they own the copyright? There's this whole discussion about, like Klingon, for example, who owns the language? Is it the person who created it? Is it the people, the mass of people who started adding on it and created this language? So, what do you think about it? You create a language, and then other people start expanding it.

## Can a Language Be Copyrighted?

**David**: First, I don’t believe that a language can be copyrighted. I don’t think the idea even makes sense. Certainly, the studios believe that a language can be copyrighted. But let them try to enforce it. Seriously, what would that even mean? You can copyright a definition because that’s unique wording, right? But you can’t copyright the words themselves because they’re ideas. It’s obvious how that applies to natural languages, but I think it should be obvious that it applies to created languages, as well. Because, after all, languages, created or otherwise, don’t exist. They’re not things. They’re just ideas. Anytime you write a language down, whether it be in a dictionary, whether it be in a grammar, all you’re doing is just saying this is what we know about this language at this time. It doesn’t matter how complete it is. You could stop time and write everything about the English language right now in a five-hundred-volume series, but the moment you started time again it would be out of date, because that's how languages work.

Created or otherwise, languages are either living or dead, and that’s the only distinction that makes any sense. All the languages I’ve created are being actively worked on more or less right now by me. At some point in time I will die, and then I won’t be actively working on them. If somebody else wants to pick them up and work with them and create new words, they can. If somebody else wants to say, “Hey, that’s not the real language that David Peterson created! That word is not a real part of it!” And then, whatever, just that’s your business. It’s up to each individual to decide what “counts” as an authentic version of a language. I just wish the fans wouldn’t fight. It seems ridiculous. Honestly, it's just embarrassing. David Salo, who was a linguist who studied Tolkien’s languages, published *A Gateway to Sindarin: A Grammar of an Elvish Language from J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings*, and for the *Lord of the Rings* movies they hired him to translate things into some of Tolkien’s conlangs for the films. Words needed to be added, because the dialogue called for words that didn’t exist (that Tolkien hadn’t created), and so Salo created some vocabulary. But for the most part, it was Tolkien’s languages with a few additional words. But some people within the Tolkien language communities said, “This isn’t Tolkien's language! It's barbarous! It’s blah blah blah!” I find this childish. They can leave their commentary to themselves. All one needs to say, “These are words David Salo created for Quenya or Sindarin, and these are words Tolkien created,” and then just be done with it.

The same is true of my own languages, or really anybody else’s languages. If some language creator says, “When I die, nobody can use my language ever again,” I guess you can decide if you want to honor their wishes or not. The only thing that is disingenuous would be trying to represent someone else’s work as your own. So, if somebody takes one of my languages and says, “I created this. I created all these words.” Well, no, that’s not honest. But if they want to take that and say, “Here’s the language that David Peterson started, and I expanded upon it,” that’s totally cool. And really I don’t think that anything can stop either of those situations. The former isn’t really a copyright issue; it’s more a fraud situation.

But even there it gets a little tricky, because let’s just say, for example, that you could copyright a language (leaving the adapted ones aside). Let’s say that I just created it by myself and called it Kamakawi. Let’s say that I could copyright that. I certainly have created every single word of it, and I made its dictionary. And then let’s say somebody published a book saying, “This is the grammar of the Kamakawi language,” and I go and look at it, and I see that they’ve made a lot of mistakes, and that even though they have actual grammar explanations, they’re not the same as mine. What could I say to that? Is it even my language if the grammar doesn’t match? Would my copyright have been violated? If yes, what percentage of the grammar would need to be changed for it not to violate that copyright?

**Editors**: It’s technically not the same language.

**David**: Right, and so it's a type of thing where it’s like… Here’s an example I like to use. If you have two people learning Spanish in high school and they say to each other, “Hey, man, usted querer, jugar some al basketball” and the other guy says, “Yeah, man, yo querer to.” That wasn’t correct Spanish. But then what was it? It wasn’t English, right? What do you even say about that? You can clearly say it’s not Spanish, and yet it’s not not Spanish right?

So, the same thing can be said of somebody using a created language badly. And the other thing that makes this so ridiculous is… You can imagine that a place where HBO might get upset is, say, who knows, for whatever reason, without permission or even asking for it, somebody just puts up a movie where all this Dothraki dialogue is in it, and they don’t even identify it as having anything to do with Dothraki. Then if you go through it, most of it is correct, but some of it is not. I’ve seen people translate songs on YouTube into Valyrian. And it’s the type of thing where they just use words they found in an online dictionary. So, every single noun is in the nominative singular, and every single verb is in the infinitive, and the word order mirrors English word order exactly. Even if you had a strong copyright for High Valyrian, how could you even say that that was an instance of the language if it’s so badly translated? It’s very, very difficult, and it seems to me to be a thoroughly pointless endeavor. What are you even trying to do?

And I think HBO really understands this. Paramount never strongly pursued the claim on Klingon because, when you have a language that is so strongly associated with your brand, anytime anybody uses it is just free advertising. And so I think it’s the same thing with fan fiction, where, especially in the nineties, authors would come out strongly and say, I am really opposed to this fan fiction, but they wouldn’t do anything about it, because they knew, and the publishers knew, too, this is nothing more than advertisement, and it is a good thing. So yeah, I would love to see the copyright of a created language challenged in my lifetime because I want to be an expert witness during the trial. I think it would be so much fun, and I think it’s just silly to try to pursue it. So that’s a really good question.

**Editors**: Thank you! We think it's more about, not necessarily the conlanger, but whoever the owner of the show is wanting to make money from it.

**David**: Yeah, and it’s really weird. I wish fandoms especially could be cool about it. Everything that's happening with Tolkien's legacy is just honestly embarrassing, and the estate is so heavy-handed… And then the fandom squabbling about words not being Tolkien’s – who cares?

**Editors**: We see that with not just the language, but some fans imagine what the *Star War*s world or the *Lord of the Rings* world should look like, and then they hate all these new shows, because they have a lot more diversity, and then they’re like “Well, I don't think the creator imagined that way.”

**David**: I mean, maybe they didn't. I wish they could see… I always like to think about this. The 1970s, maybe the 1960s, had this whole movement to do plays with, like, no sets or costumes, but they would do entire Shakespeare productions, with maybe a box or a stool on stage, and that was it. And it’s a cool idea, so you can do that, and you could present the same information in many different ways. When it comes to just how authentic the sets are, or how authentic whatever gender or race the people are, I’d rather say, “Just see what they do, and see if it’s interesting.” I think that a lot of people think an adaptation of something has to be the *perfect* adaptation, and that there can be only one adaptation, and it has to match my idea of the one adaptation to rule them all. I understand this to a certain extent. One of my favorite books of all time was *The Great Gatsby*, and for whatever reason I imagined Jimmy Stewart playing the role of Gatsby when I was reading the book, and it was a very strong association. I’m a big fan of Jimmy Stewart, and it’s very precious to me, that mental association, and for that reason, I haven’t watched any of the *Gatsby* adaptations. But it’d be so ridiculous for me to then say the other adaptations shouldn't have been made and are automatically garbage because they don’t align with my personal preferences.

## Conlang Creators as Artists

**Editors**: One of the things that our questions and your discussion about it brought back to our mind is the way in which writing a conlang, creating a conlang, inventing a conlang is a work of art, or is an act of art. And I think we all agree with you on that. We’ve thought about that a lot. I think we feel personal loyalty to the conlang writers. We got really into the concreole in *The Expanse*, for example, written by Nick Farmer. We had been imagining a crew instead of an individual writer. But you actually framed this for us. It’s not even that. It’s a contractor who comes in from the outside who has no say, and then their stuff is just used.

**David**: It’s very different, how much this is honored. It depends. It starts from the show, right, for the director of a television show or a movie. And I’ve had very, very different experiences. I’ve had experiences where I do the translation. They receive it. They put it in the show, and if they decide they don’t like it, they cut off a word or change the subtitle later, and suddenly it doesn’t even match, and that’s the level we’re at. And then other times, in *Defiance*, for example, I watched the dailies every single day, and I was able to give my input during production even though I didn't always win out. I’ve also had every experience in between those two extremes. Similarly, how much the actors care varies. In fact, on the third season of *Defiance*, Nichole Galicia would always text me and ask me to do extra translations, so she could throw them in because she thought her character should be speaking in her own language, even though the line called for English. She wanted to learn the language. She just put her whole heart and soul into it. And then I’ve also worked with actors where – I heard this from other people – they felt insulted that I sent recordings because they were proper actors trained in the British tradition, and how dare I insult them by sending recordings of a language. *They* knew how to do it. They didn’t need input from someone like me.

**Editors**: Yeah, if you were the conlanger, though, and if you were given the status of one of the writers, would that change things for you?

**David**: Yes, to an extent the writers certainly do have more say, but it's still going to be the show runner’s call. Honestly the only way you'll see it really work is if the conlanger is the show runner and has enough time and wherewithal to be able to focus on the things that need their attention. If *Defiance* had the kind of success that something like *Stargate* had, my dream was that *Defiance* could run as long as *Stargate* did. But of course I don't think such a thing is even possible anymore, the way TV works now. But I always hope that one day down the line every single line in an episode could be in a conlang.

**Editors**: Yeah, we’d be into that, too.

**David**: The whole thing would be done with subtitles, and we’d ask the viewers just to deal with it. Yes, that’d be awesome. You need somebody who really understands language at a fundamental level. And then they need support, to be able to execute that vision. And while there've been conlang authors, there haven't really been conlang show runner slash directors. That may happen in the future, though. That'd be cool.

## The Conscripts, the Writing Systems

**Editors**: We know when you are creating a constructed language, you think of the world, the people, their society. And then you start thinking of the language right? But how do you develop the conscripts?

**David**: The writing systems? Those are one of my favorite things to do. Writing systems are unique among language material, because languages are systems that are so large that they can never be completed. And furthermore, it doesn't make sense for them to be completed, no language is ever completed, so you just work and work to make it bigger and bigger, but you can never hope to create a language that's as large as a natural language. You need the work of many hands. So something like Esperanto can function like a natural language because people have been working with it for more than a century and expanding its vocabulary and using it. A single person just doesn't have that kind of time.

A writing system, on the other hand, is a small system, and you can create the whole thing. You can't necessarily predict how everybody is going to use it. I'm sure when somebody created the number sign, they had no way of predicting the hashtag centuries later. But you can still create that whole system. And also, unlike spoken language, we have enough evidence to know how writing starts from the very beginning and evolves all the way up to the modern state, which is something we don't have with language. And so, you can actually do the whole thing. Often I do an abbreviated process. It's simulated, but that's what I will start with. I will start with whether it's as far back to the pictograph stage, or a little bit further along. I imagine what things they would have been talking about, what they would have considered important enough to try to draw pictures of, way back when, and what they would have been writing on, what they would have been writing with. And then how does this start to map onto language in a systematic way.

And so you move on from the pictographic stage to maybe coming up with associations between specific words and specific pictures, and then associating specific pictures with sounds, because this is what happened with natural languages.

Systemic change occurs when a writing system for one language is borrowed by people who speak a different language, and it doesn't line up. In our world, what they did when that happened was they took some of the pictures and said, "Well, this kind of starts with this sound. Let's just use it for that sound by itself," which is a really key moment. As a conlanger, you can do that same thing, and then you can change the writing implement, the writing surface, what it's written on, and you can evolve it slowly over the centuries, simulating the evolution, and get to the point where you get to a writing system and a modern font like with *Defiance*, where they had typography. I made sure to tell them, here are some other things that you can do with it, like you can do a blocky style. You can do it as outline. Here's what it might look like spray painted as graffiti. Art departments really like that, like on *Star-Crossed* of all things, and on *Bright*. They're pretty good with imagining, if this is the writing system, we can create something that is similar to it, because every instantiation of a writing system is still reflective of some imaginary glyph, right? It's like they were saying, if this is just one instantiation, what might some others look like?

And some of those art departments were really good at producing some really, I think, wonderful fonts. The Netflix film *Bright* had one such art department. A guy made a shirt for a fake beer, I think it was Pale Orc Ale. He made a shirt that had the image on it with this beautiful version of my typography that he had invented, and I was like, "Where did you get that?" He said, "Oh, I just made it." I should have said, "Can I pay you to make me one? I love it!"

So that's what I do. And then I create a font, and I make sure to tell the art department, it's just a font face (imagine how many other things you can do with the Roman script beyond Arial). And I tell them if you have questions about how to do that, let me know, and so some of them roll with that and some of them don't. Like on *Vampire Academy*, they just used our font. They use it everywhere. I love it. I'm so happy, really, I like that. That was the first time a show actually made things you can buy in the NBC Store – right now – that feature the font that we created. That's never happened before. They should have done that for *Defiance*. But unlike *Star-Crossed* or *Bright*, *Vampire Academy* simply used the font we created as is, without creating any new font faces. And that's a choice! Some don't see the value in writing systems at all.

## Con-Sign-Languages

**Editors**: Another thing we've been really interested in are con-sign-languages, that use gestures and things of that sort. So just wondering what your thoughts are in that area.

*On SLIPA*

**David**: Really, some exemplary con-sign languages are out there. In 2006 I created what I called the Sign Language IPA (SLIPA), because one of the reasons that we didn't have a lot of con-sign-languages was because we didn't have a way to write them down. In 2006 we were still dealing with the fact that a lot of people, especially on the Conlang list, had older machines that were not Unicode compliant. And so, we still had to use things, where for example, you have a word like *sham*. In IPA. You'd write it like this: [ʃæm]. In X-SAMPA, you just would use only ASCII characters to convey IPA, so we would write it like this: [S}m]. Linguists and conlangers used X-SAMPA all the time because not everybody's machine could handle Unicode. And so I came up with SLIPA because I wanted conlangers to be able to create sign languages and to use any possible hand shape or body location. The only sign languages you could find support for were ASL and BSL. There wasn't material to support any imaginable sign language. SLIPA, as it was originally conceived, was very clunky because I was trying to make sure that it could work with ASCII – which, of course, is no longer necessary. But it was also at a time where it wasn't easy to take video. Video is the best way to record a sign language, honestly, but it wasn't practical in 2006. But, yeah, I created a con-sign-lang to go along with it as a demonstration, but I was really interested in sign language phonology and Deaf culture largely because of my introduction to it from David M. Perlmutter, who did a lot of work on sign language phonology and sign language typology.[1]

*On Peterson's Con-Sign-Langs*

**David**: I never actually got to do any serious con-sign-language work, though, until *Dune*. I actually created two sign languages, and one of them got cut. It's a real bummer, because the one that remained is the Atreides battle language or sign language system. It's not a language; it's a system like the gestures they use in pro

[1] For more on SLIPA, see Peterson's "SLIPA: An IPA for Signed Languages," https://dedalvs.com/slipa.html.

football that indicate penalties and things like that, just a little bit larger.

But a Deaf character was going to be using sign language on the ornithopter, and I created a realistic sign language for him, for his lines, and then, for whatever reason they decided to have him speak instead of sign. The actor is actually Deaf, you hear this in the scene, it plays a crucial part. But originally he was supposed to be doing a sign language I created, and then they just had him speak English, which is weird. But I don't know. Maybe the actor didn’t want to do it.

I always figured that the reason more sign languages weren’t created was purely a matter of lack of familiarity and lack of ability to document them effectively.

## *Star Wars* and Conlangs

**Editors**: The sign language Tusken in *The Book of Boba Fett* and *The Mandalorian* has generated a lot of excitement even though it wasn't as far as we know fully developed. But it seemed it was leading to something interesting. A linguist did not write it: it was Troy Kotsur, an actor who knows ASL.

**David**: *Star Wars* has been very disappointing in that they persistently refuse to have people create languages and see no utility in hiring language creators – those who know how to do it.

I was interviewed for one show, and it felt like the interview went very well, but they never called me back. I don't think that show has come out yet.

It's hilarious what happened in the first J. J. Abrams film. They hired a woman who was really good at making up gibberish sounding like it came from different languages. They asked Abrams about it, and he said, “Well, who better to create a language than somebody who can make up realistic sounding gibberish?” Seriously, who better to do it? How about a language creator? Anyway, she was hired and created a language for one scene.

And even that, though, wasn’t treated with respect, because you can see with the subtitles, they didn’t include all of it. They changed the subtitles, or they cut the lines short because they were running long, and they didn’t really care about the language or how it worked. It’s so weird they actually hired somebody to do something for that rather than going with their usual gibberish when they weren't even going to implement it honestly.

*Star Wars* in particular has just been a very sore spot for me. I was born in 1981, so I grew up with it and I really enjoyed it, and nothing about it makes me happy anymore. Part of that is also the fandom, their absurd reaction to the second one, *The Last Jedi*. It was just a huge bummer. I remember I was talking with a friend who really enjoyed it like I did, but a segment of our friends were very negative about it in the way that a lot of people were. I remember he was talking to me, and he looked at me sadly. He's like, "Is it Reddit? What's making it like this? How come they don't just enjoy it? I don't know…man." I don't know either.

## What Attracts People to Learn a Particular Conlang?

**Editors**: Why do you think people want to learn anybody's made-up language? Tons of them are out there. One of us was very much interested in learning the languages in *Defiance*. What draws people to learn languages that are conlangs?

**David**: For the most part I think it's the media that they're associated with, especially if you look at the Grounders and their language Trigedasleng in *The 100*. That section of the fandom was really attached to it, and they really loved those characters; they thought Lexa was really cool! And those characters also played a more prominent role in the show.

Once *Avatar* came out, people were never going to be excited about Dothraki. There are a lot of people who are really excited to learn *some* sort of created language, but it's not necessarily important to them which one it is. When *Avatar* came out, it snapped those types of conlang fans up, and then they were gone. In *Game of Thrones*, Dothraki was *one* of the storylines in a much larger work – it was a major storyline, but it was just one of them. Also, fans of the books know that the Dothraki go away once Daenerys moves on. Even fans of the books were much more excited about High Valyrian. In fact, the first discussion of Dothraki in the *Song of Ice and Fire* forums, says, "Wow, they created a Dothraki language. So that means they're going to have to create Valyrian."

It doesn't have anything to do with the quality of the language itself, at least not for all these languages that are attached to fandom. But for those that are apart from that, it is something about the language itself that people find interesting. In *World of Warcraft*, we called it class fantasy – the idea that you can participate in an invented world in some meaningful way – in this thing that you think is really cool. With Dothraki it wasn't like people were really excited about the language. They were excited about Daenerys. Valyrian is getting more of a response now because a new show features it (*House of the Dragon*), and the ones speaking it are the ones that you wanted to think of as cool, as opposed to side characters.

It would have been a lot easier for people to become attached to Dothraki and use it because it's a head-initial language as opposed to High Valyrian, which is a head-final language. It’s more lightly inflectional. The grammar just comes a lot more easily to me for Dothraki than it does for High Valyrian, which I still find difficult. Even Castithan, from *Defiance*, was easier because Castithan is head-final but was a lot less inflectional. I got to really memorize exactly which postpositions assign which of the three case endings, because I used it so much in translation. That made it a lot easier. I'm getting better with that with High Valyrian, due to its increased usage in both Duolingo and in *House of the Dragon*.

## What Is Your Favorite of the Languages You have Created?

**David**: My favorite language that I've created was Irathient, also from *Defiance*. It was very difficult, but I just loved it, and I loved it because of the sound of it. I loved the grammar of it. I loved the way it worked. My next favorite was probably Munja’kin, which I created for *Emerald City*. It’s the language that aligns more with my personal interest in language, in terms of languages that I enjoy learning which are head-initial, mostly isolating that type of thing.

**Editors Afterword**: Thank you very much for this interview and for revising it in written form for readers! And thanks so much for your generosity with information and your candor.

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