

# How to build a 'perfect' language

September 6 2019, by Bettina Beinhoff

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Credit: Anna Tarazevich from Pexels

It's well known that JRR Tolkien wrote the *Lord of the Rings* cycle to create people to [speak the languages he had invented](#). But, in the television age, artificially created or invented languages—we call them "[conlangs](#)"—have been gaining increasing attention with the popularity of television series such as *Star Trek* and *Game of Thrones*, and films

such as Avatar.

Fantasy and science fiction are the ideal vehicles for conlangs. Marc Okrand, an American linguist whose core research area is Native American languages, invented Klingon for Star Trek, while Paul Frommer of the University of Southern California created the Na'vi [language](#) for Avatar.

The fantasy series Game of Thrones involved several languages, including Dothraki and Valyrian, which were created by David J Peterson, a "conlanger" who has invented languages for several other shows. Most recently, fantasy thriller The City and The City featured the language Illitan, created by Alison Long of Keele University in the UK.

I teach how to construct languages and one question my students usually ask is: "How do I make a perfect language?" I need to warn that it's impossible to make a language "perfect"—or even "complete." Rather, an invented language is more likely to be appropriate for the context—convincing and developed just enough to work in the desired environment. But here are a few things to bear in mind.

## **Who will speak this language and why?**

It is very important to be clear about the aims of the language and its (fictional or real) speakers. When conlangs are created for a specific fictional character, the aims and speakers are determined by the story, the author or producer.

In some cases, fragments or descriptions of the language do exist. This was the case for Illitan, which was described as having "jarring" sounds in the novel The City and The City and there were a few Dothraki expressions in the first Game of Thrones novel. But what if there are no instructions? In [a survey I ran](#) a few years ago, many language creators

pointed out that a sense of aesthetics and beauty guided them, along with the need to make the conlangs sound natural and a very pragmatic sense of how easily the languages could be pronounced.

There is also a strong link between language and culture, where some languages attract a large fan base because of the culture and community this language represents. [A good example is Na'vi](#), which attracts many learners because of its welcoming community of speakers. In some cases the language itself has developed a strong culture and community, as is the case for Esperanto, which [aims to bring people together](#) regardless of their background and supports a strong sense of solidarity.

## Start with sounds

The sound system is typically the starting point for language creators. This makes sense, given that sound is usually the first thing that we encounter in a new language. Do we want our conlang to sound harsh, alien or even aggressive? In [the Klingon sound system](#) this effect is achieved as follows:

1. Fricative consonants—like the initial sounds in the words "chair," "show" and "jump" or the final sound in the Scottish word "loch."
2. Plosive consonants—such as "t," "p" and "k"—ideally produced with a stronger puff of air than is customary in spoken English.
3. Sounds that are unusual—at least to the ears of English speakers, who are typically the primary target audience. So imagine a consonant that sounds like a "k" that is produced far back in the throat (a sound which exists in Modern Standard Arabic) or a "g" that is produced more like a "gargle" and exists, for example, in Modern Greek and Icelandic.

These sounds all contribute to Klingon's alien quality. On the other hand, Tolkien's Elvish languages of Sindarin and Quenya were developed to sound aesthetically pleasing and—according to Tolkien himself—are intended to sound "of a European kind." So Tolkien's Elvish languages have systems which are much closer to those of European languages such as Welsh, Finnish and Old English, all of which influenced Tolkien when creating these languages.

## **Words and customs**

Once we know how our language sounds, we can develop words. Here, the link to the culture of the speakers is important in establishing the most important words and expressions. For example, the Na'vi are deeply connected to nature and this connection is ingrained in their words, metaphors and customs. For example, when the Na'vi kill an animal they speak a prayer to show respect, gratitude and humility.

In contrast, the Dothraki—nomadic warriors relying on horses—literally say: "Do you ride well?" when asking: "Are you well?"

## **Grammar**

Now we need to put our words together in a sensible way, including expressing tenses and plural forms. We can do this by adding different endings—so, for example, Esperanto uses the verb ending -as to express present tense, -os for past and -is for future, as in *amas* (love), *amos* (loved) and *amis* (will love).

We also need to decide on the word order and sentence structure. English has a typical structure of Subject-Verb-Object, but an alien-sounding conlang like Klingon may use a more unusual structure like Object-Subject-Verb—for example, the book (Object) – my friend (Subject) – reads (Verb).

## Writing systems

Writing systems are bound to the culture of the speakers—and not all languages are written. Cultures with purely oral traditions, like the Dothraki, do not write. However, where such writing systems appear, they are often an artistic endeavor in themselves. The most famous example is [Tengwar](#), one of the scripts Tolkien developed for the Elvish languages.



which have subsequently been changed [as they were too cumbersome](#).

So, like natural languages, conlangs change and develop (for example, all conlangs [regularly acquire new words](#)). What is important, though, is to keep the speaker community active, otherwise only fragments of your conlang may remain, [as is the case for Sauron's Black Speech](#) in the Lord of the Rings. But given what we know about the evil Sauron, perhaps that is just as well.

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