I’ve Done It! Here’s How to Create Your Own Language (Conlang)

A simple guide to conlanging — how to create a language

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Following

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Illustration by the author using Canva and AI.

I've always been interested in languages. I grew up switching between a Creole language and French.

One minute I'm chitchatting with my friends in the streets using Creole's warm rhythm and dry phonetics, and the next I'm learning history, the sciences, arithmetic, etc., in school using the French language.

This gave me an early, intimate insight into how two different linguistic systems can coexist in a single brain — and a single culture.

So, I tried to understand the relationship between these two languages and how they work. My interest in conlanging skyrocketed when I watched *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and realized that the languages used weren't real.

I later saw the movie *Arrival,* which uses a circular type of script as an alienish language.

Needless to say, I loved it — and this is when I decided to give *conlanging* a try…

What is a conlang?

A conlang is a constructed language, meaning it's a language that people invent. It's not something that was born naturally.

An example of that would be the *Lord of the Rings* languages.

I've created my own conlang. It's far from done, but at least I've mastered the basic steps, which I'm sharing with you today.

The steps of creating your own language:

· Determine the purpose of the language

· Develop the phonology of your language

◦ Phonotactics

· Write a script

· Develop a grammar

◦ Word formation

- Number system
- Build a lexicon
- Using loan translations
- Compound words
- Semantic shifts
- Onomatopeia
- Affixation
- Semantics and pragmatics
- Polysemy
- Synonymy
- Antonymy
- Inflection vs isolation
- Culture and context
- Create idiomatic expressions for your conlang
- Refinement and evolution
- Documentation and usage
- Community and expansion

Determine the purpose of the language

Now, the first thing you must do is decide what your language is for — The purpose of your language, so to speak.

For a conlang, this can fall under 1 one of these 4 categories:

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Illustration by the author using Canva — alien figures are AI-generated

It can be an auxiliary language like Esperanto, which is designed for global communication.

It can be an experimental language. If you're interested in linguistics, you might want to apply or explore a set of linguistic theories through your language.

It can just be a personal language if you wanna have fun.

But I created what they call an "artistic" conlang, similar to the languages of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The purpose of my language is for it to be part of a fictional world. In my case, the speakers of my language are from Pluto.

Why Pluto?

I think it can finally be a planet — if people are living on it and speaking their native language, I think that can give it a shot at being a planet!

Develop the phonology of your language

First, we need to have sounds for the language.

If it's not going to be a sign language, we need to do a ***phonemic inventory*** — that is, deciding which sounds are present in the language, and which aren't.

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Illustration by the author — alien figure is AI-generated

Since I wanted to keep it simple, I decided on these sounds:

| a | e | i | u | p | t | k | m | n | r | s | l | v | z |

So, my language has 4 vowels and 10 consonants.

a.e..i...u..p..t..k..m..n.r..s..l..v..z

The Erythion vowels sound like the Spanish vowels. A, E, I, U — and the consonants sound like English, without the aspirations in p, t, and K.

The other thing is, the r sound is a trilled R-rrrrrr.

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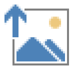

Illustration by the author

Phonotactics

Now we need to do something called “phonotactics.” This means deciding which letters can sit next to each other and which can’t.

Like in English, there are about 400 zero-hit combinations for letter pairing.

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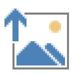

Illustration by the author

In Erythion, I'm not going to allow 3 consonants to sit next to each other.

But I'm going to allow diphthongs with my vowels like these:

/ai/ = 𐋡𐋶

/au/ = 𐋡𐋸

/ei/ = 𐋠𐋶

/iu/ = 𐋶𐋸

And I'm not going to have any stress words either.

Write a script

Now, we need to have a writing system.

I wanted my language to have that alienish type of look. So, I went on this website: "https://symbl.cc/en/" and found an alphabet called "Osage."

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But you can also draw your characters if you want to.

Let’s say you want to write an alphabet for the “Squared People.” You could have a script that looks like this:

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Illustration by the author

And for a language based on star constellations, you can have an alphabet like this:

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Illustration by the author

So the Erythion alphabet sounds like this:

𐤀 (a) — a (𐤀)

𐤄 (e) — e (𐤄)

𐤉 (i) — i (𐤉)

𐤕 (u) — u (𐤕)

𐤐 (p) — pa (𐤐𐤀)

𐤕 (t) — ta (𐤕𐤀)

↑ (k) — ka (↑X̄)

ˈıˈ (m) — mu (ˈıˈѪ)

б (n) — nu (бѪ)

Ʋ (r) — ri (Ʋᘐ)

Ɲ (s) — sa (ƝX̄)

Ч (l) — li (Чᘐ)

Ᵽ (v) — vi (Ᵽᘐ)

Ѧ (z) — za (ѦX̄)

Develop a grammar

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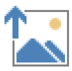

Illustration by the author — Alien figure is AI generated

Now, you need to have grammar. In other words, a basic set of rules for using the language.

Also, remember not to stress about it! Just write down things you'd like to have in your language.

Like all languages, your conlang will be a living organism that's going to evolve.

So, you don't have to get everything right.

The first grammatical component that I built was the personal pronouns. I decided that I would have 2 third-person personal pronouns (masculine and feminine) and 1 non-personal pronoun.

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Illustrations by the author — AI generated alien figures

I've also decided that these pronouns are personal pronouns, object pronouns, and possessive pronouns at the same time.

For instance, the word that I have for love is "suva" — So, I love you is:

“Mi suva Leku”

ı'ϛ ᑎᛯ⊬⧖ ϥ)(↑ᛯ

Here are the pronouns of my conlang:

mi (ı'ϛ): “I/me,” simple and direct.

leku (ϥ)(↑ᛯ): “You” (singular), as previously established.

ni (ϭϛ): “He,” using a straightforward CV structure.

ta (ϩ⧖): “She,” with a distinct initial consonant to differentiate from “he.”

ku (↑ᛯ): “It,” using different consonants and vowels to distinguish it from “he” and “she.”

milu (ı'ϛϥᛯ): “We/us,” combining “mi” with “lu” for plurality.

lekun (𐑤𐑧𐑒𐑵𐑯): “You” (plural), derived from the singular form.

nilu (𐑯𐑲𐑤𐑿): “They/them,” combining elements from “he” and “plural” to create a distinct form.

Word formation

Now let’s talk about word formation. One thing to understand is the idea of inflection vs isolation.

For instance, when I use the past tense of the verb “to walk” — “walked,” that’s inflection. Same thing when I use the plural form of the word “cat.”

But when I use the future tense of the verb “to walk” — “will walk,” that’s isolation because I use a marker (a different word to change the meaning of the initial word).

In my conlang, I’m using more predominantly isolation, but for the plural form, I’m using inflection.

So, to translate “tree,” I use the word *Kata*. And the plural form is *Katana*.

Same for “book,” which is *Nipa,* and “books” is *Nipana*.

Singular: kata (ᛏᚷᛟᚷ) — “tree”

Plural: katana (ᛏᚷᛟᚷᛟᚷ) — “trees”

Singular: nipa (ᛟᛃᚺᚷ) — “book”

Plural: nipana (ᛟᛃᚺᚷᛟᚷ) — “books”

Number system

Now would be a good time to come up with the numbers to experiment further with the plural forms.

In Erythion, we have the basic numbers from 1 to 10:

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Illustration by the author

0 — nuza (ᘐᛯᐞᛝ)

1 — para (ᚺᛝᔑᛝ)

2 — te (ᖉᔐᐠ)

3 — mira (ᑊᑊᕋᔑᛝ)

4 — raku (ᔑᛝᛏᛯ)

5 — lupi (ᓀᛯᚺᕋ)

6 — seku (ᑎᔐᐠᛏᛯ)

7 — vanu (ᕈᛝᘐᛯ)

8 — zati (ᐞᛝᖉᕋ)

9 — net (ᘐᔐᐠᖉ)

10 — kisu (ᛏᕋᑎᛯ)

I’m gonna use tons of inflections here as well: for 11, it’s going to be *Kisu para — Kisupara*.

For 12, it’s going to be *Kisu te — Kisute*.

I’m gonna keep that same base 10 for 20 and just flip the order: *tekisu* (ᚺᛝᔑᛝᛏᕋᑎᛯ).

30 is going to be *mirakisu* (𐤉𐤉𐤍𐤗𐤊𐤍𐤔), and so on…

I'm only going to use a different word when I get to 100: *Taka* (𐤕𐤗𐤊𐤗).

Build a lexicon

So, after you have all the grammatical rules down, it's time to develop a lexicon — to build a vocabulary for your language.

Using loan translations

For Erythion, what I did was use loan translations from Latin and Greek — so essentially, for every word, I take a root word and adapt it to the spelling and scripting of my conlang.

For instance, for water, I would take the Latin word *Aqua* — and translate it into *aku* (𐤊𐤅𐤊𐤔).

And then I would use specific suffixes.

For the plural form, I would add "-na"….

So, *Akuna* for waters.

If I want to say “lake,” I would use the suffix “-so” to indicate a large body of water.

And if I want to turn it into an adjective like “aquatic,” I could use the suffix “-nari” to make the word *akunari*.

So, this root-based system is one way to create new words for your language.

But you have other options as well…

Compound words

You can use compound words… For example, in my conlang, *Kata* (↑ᛝᛟᛝ) is “tree,” and *Nipa* is “book” (ᚷᔑᚺᛝ). Therefore, I could have the word *Katanipa* meaning: ↑ᛝᛟᛝᚷᔑᚺᛝ — wooden book.

Semantic shifts

You could do some semantic shifts as well. For example, *Raku* (ᔑᖘᛏᛯ) originally means “4,” but I could extend it to mean something like the adjective “stable” when describing a 4-legged object or furniture.

Onomatopeia

Another thing you could do is take sounds in the real world and adjust them to the spelling and phonology of your language.

So, for my conlang, “tak” or *taktak* ᓚᖘᛏᓚᖘᛏ can mean “knock” or knocking. *Rumpu* ᔑᛯᑊᑊᐩᛯ can mean “thunder,” *vauvau* ᐯᖘᛯᐯᖘᛯ can mean “bark,” and so on…

Affixation

You could use affixation to modify the meaning of a word that’s already in your lexicon.

There are plenty of such examples in English. For instance, the prefix “ir-” usually negates the base word. “Regular” -> “Irregular”; “Responsible” -> Irresponsible.

In the same way, the suffix “-less” usually transforms a word into an adjective or adverb that means a lack or the absence of something.

Shirt -> Shirtless

Bottom -> Bottomless

Semantics and pragmatics

Now, you need to focus on the meaning of your words and the relationship between these words.

Polysemy

You need to decide whether you’re going to have polysemy — that is, whether the words of your language will have multiple meanings — or if every single word will stand for itself.

Like the word “bat” in English; it can mean either a flying mammal or a piece of sports equipment.

Synonymy

You also need to decide whether you’re going to have a single word for each idea you want to express or not. You have to decide whether you're going to have synonyms, like the words “begin” and “start” in English.

Antonymy

Are you going to have antonyms, which are words that have opposite meanings? Well, you kind of have to do that. Because if you want to express certain ideas in a language, you need to have the capacity to express the opposite of them as well.

Inflection vs isolation

But how are you going to achieve that? Are you going to have a separate word, or are you going to alter the word?

For example, the antonym of the word “happy” can be both “unhappy” and “sad.” And the antonym of the word “moral” can be both “evil” and “immoral.”

Culture and context

Even when it’s a constructed language, there should be a culture behind it.

Create idiomatic expressions for your conlang

So, it’s time to work on some idiomatic expressions that are unique to your specific culture.

So, in my language, I have phrases like:

Ziraku metuna (⍙ϩƲӾ↑ⵅ ╵╷╵ↄ(↻ⵅ6Ӿ), which literally means “starlight dreams. This conveys the idea of “ambitious thoughts.”

We also have the phrase *Kapisu aku sulitu* (𐤊𐤐𐤔𐤖 𐤀𐤊𐤖 𐤎𐤖𐤋𐤕𐤖) — translated literally as “explore the first water,” meaning “to seek fundamental knowledge.”

Refinement and evolution

Now, you need to make sure that all these rules are consistent by constantly refining the language.

Languages evolve — that’s what they do — so don’t be scared to review your language as much as possible.

Documentation and usage

Your conlang needs to be documented, meaning that all these rules that we talked about need to be archived somewhere.

You may have a grammar guide, a dictionary, a phrasebook, complete texts and translations, etc.

Community and expansion

The last step is to share your language. There are things that you're not going to figure out on your own.

So, share your language on any social media platform. I know there's a subreddit for conlang, specifically. You can take advantage of that.

Remember, the more speakers your language has, the more likely it is to survive.

The video

Video by the author!

Language
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