

How to create a fictional language



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Oct 16, 2019

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So you're working on a sci-fi novel, spec-fic short story or fantasy screenplay and you want to include a made-up language to give your dialogue real intensity? Don't just inject some gibberish and call it a day. Creating your own fictional language can be a fascinating, effective way to add depth to your story and strengthen your worldbuilding. And it's a lot of fun!

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What is a fictional language?

Unlike English, Cantonese, Spanish, Hindi, and other natural languages that are spoken throughout the real world, fictional languages only exist within an imaginary world, like the fictional setting of a book, TV show, video game, or movie.

Since fictional languages are created intentionally, rather than evolving naturally, they're known as "constructed languages"

(often shortened to “conlangs”). People have been creating constructed languages for hundreds of years, but their popularity boomed with the advent of the internet. Today, there are more constructed languages than natural languages, with numerous online communities and forums that let conlangers get ideas and share their work.

The very first constructed language was created long before the invention of the internet. In the 12th century, German nun and composer Hildegard von Bingen came up with what she called Lingua Ignota, or “Unknown Language,” for use in her religious songs.

Three hundred years later, constructed languages pivoted from worship enhancements to philosophical and scientific tools. Philosophers like John Wilkins tried to come up with languages that were extremely precise, removing the ambiguity of metaphor, idiom, and arbitrary word meanings.

Then in the 19th century, language construction for philosophy and science gave way to international diplomacy

and trade. The quest was on to create an international auxiliary language, which would be easy to learn and use by people throughout the world. Esperanto is the most famous of these constructed languages.

And finally, we come to the era of the “artistic languages,” a period of language construction that includes fictional languages like Klingon from “Star Trek,” the Elvish languages from *Lord of the Rings*, Dothraki from “Game of Thrones,” and Navi from *Avatar*. Author J. R. R. Tolkien is credited as the first person to create a complete fictional language, a project he started working on long before penning the stories that would feature the languages. Starting in the 20th century and continuing to this day, artistic languages are created for purely fictional, aesthetic or artistic purposes; they aren’t necessarily meant to be spoken or written by anyone in the real world.

How to create a fictional language

Coming up with a constructed language can be a complex undertaking. Whether you just need a few authentic sounding words for your extraterrestrials or orcs to utter, or want to find out how to make your own language from start to finish, these seven simple tips will get you started.

1. How many words do you really need?

What's the scope of your project? Are you going to use your brand-new fictional language throughout a franchise or series, like Klingon or Dothraki? Or do you just want to add some color to your dialogue, like Anthony Burgess did with the Nadsat slang he invented for *A Clockwork Orange*, or the Newspeak jargon George Orwell included in his novel *1984*?

If you're not sure, start by creating a “ naming language.” This very basic type of fictional language typically just includes names of places, characters, and a few simple words or phrases, like greetings.

Start small; you can always build upon it.

2. What do you want to talk about?

The next step is to make a list of the words and phrases you want to include in your story. What are your characters usually talking about? War? Magic? Space travel? Just small talk?

Dialogue that revolves around bartering and trade will require a different vocabulary (numbers, currency names, and contractual phrases) than conversations between lovers (endearments and ... well, use your imagination!)

As *The Economist* notes, “Dothraki has no word for toilet, for example, but (being the language of horse-riding warriors) more than 20 for horse.”

If you’re not sure which words you need yet, take a look at the 100 most common words in the English language. No matter what your characters wind up talking about, chances are

words like “I,” “the,” “and,” “with,” “yes” and “no” will make an appearance at some point.

3. Is the language actually spoken?

In her 1980 novel, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, author Jean M. Auel provided her Neanderthal characters with a language that was almost fully non-verbal, with gestures, body language, and facial expressions taking the place of speech. And in the 2016 film , humans encounter extraterrestrials who communicate solely via a circular written language. Your fictional language doesn't have to come from your characters' mouths.

If spoken language is your goal and your characters aren't human, think about how their alien, elven, or beastly anatomy might affect the way they produce sounds.

As Amber Massey writes, “Does the monster or alien have a different type of tongue? Do the elves or goblins have a different facial structure? These things affect language. By modifying the language to reflect a character's culture or

physical shape, you can make your entire world more believable.”

This is your fictional language: when it comes to how it’s communicated, you can be as creative as you want.

4. What does it sound like?

The way a language sounds or is pronounced is called phonology. In order to start building your fictional language, you need to come up with a consistent phonology. The best way to do this — and avoid the English-like gobbledygook found in bad 20th-century sci-fi movies — is to take a look at the different sounds that occur in natural languages around the world.

According to Massey, “In *Lord of the Rings*, Sindarin was inspired by Welsh, and Quenya was based on Finnish. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Nadsat was inspired by Russian slang.”

The natural languages of the world are filled with sounds that the English language lacks. From the tonal systems of Mandarin and Vietnamese to the click consonants found in Khoisan languages to the nasal sounds of French to German and Dutch gutturals, there are myriad options to choose from.

And you don't have to limit yourself to the phonology of natural languages. Why not expand your phonology to include unusual oral sounds like sung syllables or whistles, or add non-oral sounds like finger snaps or claps?

5. Grammar time

Nouns, verbs, adjectives. Possessives and plurals. Gender if you want it. This is where rules get made and things get complicated. Don't get overwhelmed! Remember, you can always add to your fictional language as you go.

The first step is to choose the order that words will appear in sentences. Word order doesn't change from one sentence to the next in some languages; in others, it can move around. To

keep confusion at a minimum, however, you'll probably want to come up with a fixed word order.

Will you use subject-object-verb order (SOV; "John apples bought"), as Chinese, French, Russian, and half of all natural languages do?

Or subject-verb-object order (SVO; "John bought apples"), like one-third of natural languages, including English?

Or maybe the extremely rare object-subject-verb order (OSV; "Apples John bought"), found mainly in the indigenous languages of the Amazon basin?

Once you've nailed down your fictional language's word order, you'll have a few decisions to make:

- * How are plurals formed?
- * How do possessives work? ("the car of Juan" vs. "Juan's car")
- * Will you use articles ("the" and "a") or not?

- * Will you have compound words?
- * Will your language have gender (el libro/la manzana vs. the book/the apple)?
- * Where do adjectives and adverbs fit within your word order?

There's a lot more to grammar, of course, but this will get you on the right path. If you want to create a fully functional fictional language, you can explore the many conlang resources, communities and forums, like [The Language Construction Kit](#), the [Language Creation Society](#), or David J. Peterson's *[The Art of Language Invention](#)*.

6. Make it feel real

This is where you get to stretch your imagination. What is it that sets your fictional language apart from your native tongue?

Is there a version of the language for women and a different one for men? Are there dialects that vary by age — one for young children, another for teens, a third for adults, and a

final vernacular only used in old age? Or idioms that change based on the person's occupation or class?

No language is strictly formal. What kind of slang is there? Is it made up of "loan words" from other languages? What are the honorifics, like sir and ma'am? What constitutes rude speech, and what are the worst insults? What are the most common clichés or folk sayings?

Is this fictional language a "mother tongue" like Latin, or an evolved form of colonized speech, like the Romance languages? Or maybe it's a "trade language" like the indigenous Chinook jargon of the Pacific Northwest.

Is it a "prestige language" of the educated upper classes, as French was in Russia prior to the revolution in 1905? Or is it a vulgar tongue of the peasant class, like English was following the Norman invasion?

Is the language archaic, used only for religious or ceremonial purposes like Latin is today? Is it forbidden, as indigenous

languages often become when occupiers seek to suppress the local culture?

In short, what makes your fictional language unique?

7. Keeping it all straight

Consistency is key when you're creating a fictional language.

As you come up with your sounds, words, and grammar, write it all down. You can create a dictionary or lexicon of words and phrases, grouping them alphabetically, by type of word (like “places” or “greetings”), or even by which character uses them the most.

And if you're planning to create a unique alphabet, set of characters, or an entirely new way of writing for your fictional language, this is a good place to experiment with font styles and practice your handwriting.

As usual, I'm not just doling out advice — I'm taking it! I'm currently hard at work on my own fictional language for my

next book, *A Bullet Through the Heart*. You can check on my progress at katherineluck.com, or drop me a line on [Twitter](#) and let me know how *your* fictional language is coming along.

Katherine Luck is the author of the novels The Cure for Summer Boredom and In Retrospect. Her latest book, False Memoir, combines the high stakes of a gritty psychological thriller with the guilty pleasure of a sensational true crime tell-all. You can read more of her work, including the “Dead Writers and Candy” series, at the-delve.com.



Originally published at <http://howtowritelike.com> on October 16, 2019.

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