

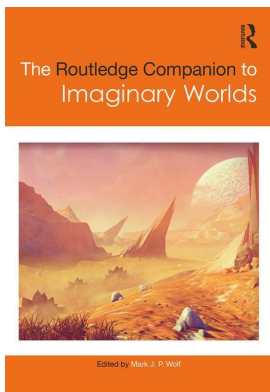
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3

INVENTED LANGUAGES

Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins

Language invention has occupied many brilliant minds throughout history, from the philosophically driven pursuit for the prelapsarian “perfect language” of Adam in the Middle Ages (Eco, 1995) to the more utilitarian 20th-century aim of facilitating communication in an increasingly globalized world by creating languages such as Esperanto and its offspring (see Okrent, 2009). At the same time, language play and language invention seem to be as much of a common human activity as is the building of imaginary worlds. In fact, one field where the two often meet naturally and effortlessly is the case of childhood paracosms (see “Worlds as Paracosms” in this volume).

Invented languages emerging out of childhood play and world-building can be seen in the childhood experiences of several authors and artists, often leading to more developed imaginative works in adulthood. Root-Bernstein’s recent study of paracosms includes in children’s “world-play” the composition of “languages and codes” alongside stories, histories, pictures, maps, etc. (2014: 70). An early example is recounted by the British writer and scholar Benjamin Heath Malkin in his *A Father’s Memoirs of His Child* (1806), an account of the life and premature death of Malkin’s son, Thomas Williams Malkin. *Memoirs* describes Thomas as a child prodigy and the inventor of an imaginary country called Allestone, which included an invented language based on Latin (Ibid.: 82). The son of the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Hartley Coleridge, also invented a world called Ejuxria, complete with peoples, geography, and invented languages (Ibid.: 85). Moreover, in childhood, the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, along with his sister Nannerl, invented the fantasy kingdom of Rükken (“the backward kingdom”) in which Mozart and his sister were the king and queen. Inhabitants of Rükken spoke a secret backward language (Morris, 1994: 52).

Perhaps the most significant early example of “world-play” that included language invention comes from the early works of the Brontë children, Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne. As children the Brontës created several invented worlds that they brought to life with narratives, maps, pictures, and elements of language invention. These activities occurred in 1826, after the death of their mother, when Charlotte Brontë was ten years old, Branwell nine, Emily eight, and Anne six. Branwell had received a set of twelve wooden soldiers from their father, which sparked a set of imaginary characters who the children called the “Young Men” or the “Twelves.” In their adventures, the “Twelves” eventually set foot in Africa, where the children conceived a fanciful “Great Glass Town” encompassing a confederacy of soldier-ruled lands, and an invented language based upon the Yorkshire dialect (Brontë, 2010: 47). Even arguably the greatest inventor of fictional languages, J. R. R. Tolkien, indicates in his essay “A Secret Vice” that his earliest experience with language invention and elements of world-building

may have been partially inspired by play with his two cousins Mary and Marjorie Incledon, who were engaged in inventing nursery languages such as Animalic (Tolkien, 2016: 8–12).

As the example of childhood paracosms demonstrates, language invention is often an integral “infrastructure” for building imaginary worlds, and this is true both for fiction and for contemporary cinematic and digital narratives. Indeed, “con-langs” (constructed languages) or “art-langs” (art languages) have been used widely to support and enhance world-building, though with varying degrees of complexity and completeness. The spectrum of language invention is a broad one. Often authors only mention an imaginary language, without necessarily giving any samples of that language in their narratives. For example, in *The Memoirs of Planetes, or a Sketch of the Laws and Manners of Makar* (1795), Thomas Northmore describes a strange place called Makar where his fictional explorer learns the language of the natives. The language is evoked by Northmore to emphasize the strangeness of the people encountered in Makar, but no actual examples of the language are recorded (Wolf, 2012: 186). Moreover, several authors of “weird literature” have invented and evoked just the name of languages to add a sense of mystery and even horror to their narratives. A good example of this is the invented language of Aklo first mentioned by Arthur Machen in his story “The White People” (1899) and then used again by H. P. Lovecraft in his Cthulhu mythos (specifically in his stories “The Dunwich Horror” (1929) and “The Haunter in the Dark” (1936)) to describe a necromantic language that if spoken would call forth demonic and evil powers (see Clore, 2009: 32–33). Nevertheless, by ascribing to them particular qualities and values, such merely named languages can still be used to characterize their speakers and their culture.

A frequent usage of invented languages is naming. Ursula K. Le Guin notes that all writers of fiction with an entirely imaginary setting have to “play Adam” in that they must make up names for the characters and creatures of their fictive world (Conley and Cain, 2006: xvii). Naming is, indeed, a subcreative act: it can be used to introduce new ideas or concepts, or to cast the Primary World word in a new light. Naming can also be used to emphasize the “otherness” of a particular race or culture in a secondary world. For example, in many English science fiction works there is a tendency to use infrequent English consonants (such as Q, X, and Z) and dense consonant clusters in the names of aliens in order to stress this sense of “otherness” (ibid.). Language inventors who take particular care to construct nomenclature that is coherent and consistent exploit the potential of linguistic invention even further, using it to give the illusion of an imaginary world with what Tolkien called the “inner consistency of reality” (Tolkien, 2008: 59), himself being a chief practitioner. As we shall see below, Tolkien did not only invent names, but also complete vocabularies, phonologies, grammars, visual writing systems, and other paratextual documents. Tolkien’s legacy of detailed language invention is clear in the work of Ursula K. Le Guin, Tom Shippey, and more recently Mark Okrand and David J. Peterson.

The invention of fictional languages that contribute to world-building has historically moved alongside a number of different parallel cultural and literary processes: (a) the development of genres that rely on constructing imaginary worlds (from utopias and travelers’ tales to science fiction and fantasy); (b) the evolution of learned or scientific thinking about the origins, nature, and role of language in human societies; (c) the history of invented languages in the Primary World, with the intention to be used for communication (from *a priori* philosophical languages to *a posteriori* International Auxiliary Languages); and (d) ultimately the historical, cultural, and social context in which they (and their imaginary worlds) are born.

It is not an accident that the earliest example usually cited of an “art-lang” to flesh out an imaginary world is to be found in a genre known as “the traveler’s tale.” This narrative framework became popular in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. It merged fiction and

non-fiction in accounts of travels to distant lands and encounters with strange peoples, some real and some invented. Two early examples of this mix of historical and fictional traveler's tales is Marco Polo's account of his real journey to the East in his *Travels* (c. 1298) and the fictional account of a crusader knight's supposed travels and adventures in the East in *The Book of Sir John Mandeville* (c. 1357) that actually imitated Polo's chronicle. The fictional "traveler's tales" that followed used this trope to mirror these real-world explorations and have an invented traveler encounter new and strange lands, peoples, and languages. One of the earliest of these is Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). More included in the back of the 1516 edition of *Utopia* a poetic quatrain written in his invented language of "Utopian." This quatrain starts with the line "Utopos ha Boccas peu la-chama polta chamaan" (Conley and Cain, 2006: 202) and clearly indicates that Utopian was an *a posteriori* language based on elements of Latin, Greek, Italian, and even Persian (before becoming Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor and subsequently executed, More was a noted European diplomat). More included a Latin translation of the quatrain for his readers. Editions that followed included an invented alphabet either by More or his humanist colleague Peter Giles to visually represent the Utopian language (see Conley and Cain, 2006: 201–203).

After More, arguably the best-known traveler's tale is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), an important landmark in this early use of language invention as a key component of world-building combined with political satire. Swift created names, place-names, and phrases in several imaginative languages spoken by the residents of the fantastical places where Lemuel Gulliver is shipwrecked. One of the unique elements of Swift's language invention was its sound-aesthetic construction, which helped distinguish between the nature and culture of the different peoples that Gulliver encountered on his fantastical travels (see David Alf's chapter in this volume). A good example of how this works is to contrast the phonetic makeup of the fragments Swift gives of the Lilliputian language, which tends to have words that end in open vowels, with the sound aesthetic of the language spoken on the island of Glubbudubdrib ("The Island of Sorcerers"), which tends to use hard consonants and word endings in plosive and dental phonemes. Another example of Swift's focus on the sound of his invented languages can be seen elsewhere in the language of the Houyhnhnm, a race of civilized horses. For the Houyhnhnm, Swift invents and gives examples of words that use onomatopoeia to bring to mind the sounds of a horse's whinny (e.g., "Gnnauyh" means "bird of prey").

The Enlightenment brought a new focus on philosophy, science (especially mathematics), and a desire for a language that would express the new scientific "truths" as clearly and perfectly as mathematical notation. Several philosophers, including Francis Lodwick, Gottfried Leibniz, John Wilkins, and George Delgarno attempted to construct a universal philosophical language that would be based on a logical and mathematical description of the universe (see Okrent, 2009: 19–75). These types of philosophical languages are called *a priori* languages as they do not reflect any overt elements of real world languages. Several fiction authors would reflect the flavor and structure of philosophical languages in their world-building. For example, in his 1676 work *La Terre Australe Connue* (*The Southern Land Known*) Gabriel de Foigny invented a language called "Australian" that reflects the *a priori* structure of the universal philosophic languages (see Conley and Cain, 2006: 167–169). In "Australian," for example, the five vowels represent the five primary elements: fire (a), air (e), salt (o), water (i), and earth (u), while the consonants stand for other elemental words or ideas (e.g., c = hot). Foigny wrote that "the advantage of this system is that one becomes a philosopher as soon as one learns the first elements of speech. One can not name anything in that country without at the same time making explicit its nature" (cited in Rogers, 2011: 168).

By the 19th century, the *a priori* languages of the previous era had given way to international languages that sought to bring different peoples closer together by simplifying the

vocabulary, grammatical structure, and syntax of existing natural languages. These “auxiliary languages” were meant to facilitate communication at a time when the world was seemingly becoming smaller. The most well-known of these auxiliary languages is Esperanto (see Okrent, 2009: 79–124). Alongside what became a vogue for international languages, a paradigm shift in the study of language also influenced the construction of art-langs. Philosophy gave way to philology, with 18th- and 19th-century philologists becoming interested in the existence of a “proto-language” spoken by a hypothetical common people, the Indo-Europeans, which through time and migration had become splintered into different language groups and dialects. A good example of this dialogue between this academic paradigm shift and the invention of art-languages is the idiom of Vril-ya in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s early dystopian science fiction story *The Coming Race* (1871), which Bulwer-Lytton dedicated to the Oxford philologist Max Müller (1823–1900). Bulwer-Lytton imaginatively incorporated Müller’s ideas on language development and decay that had been explored by Müller in *The Stratification of Language* (1868). Yaguello (1991) has characterized Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* as a work that “most deserves the name of fiction-linguistics. For the language of Vril-ya is constructed as an extrapolation from the accepted truths of the linguistic science of the time” (p. 45). By the late 19th and early 20th century, Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* had become very popular with various occult groups in England and Germany. In 1891, a group of fans of Bulwer-Lytton’s work organized a “Coming Race Bazaar” fundraiser. For one weekend, the Royal Albert Hall in London was converted into the cavern of the Vril and participants were encouraged to speak in Vril-ya aided by printed brochures containing a glossary of the language, including some conversational phrases to be used in greeting (Anon, 1891: 129)—an event that can easily be considered as a predecessor of today’s science fiction and fantasy conventions where participants speak art-languages like Klingon and Dothraki.

It was upon these academic principles and imaginative predecessors that the author and philologist J. R. R. Tolkien built his own unique body of invented languages intertwined with his myth-making and world-building. Tolkien both built upon the tradition of language invention for fiction that preceded him and at the same time pushed forward the role of art-langs as capable of mythopoeia. Tolkien was also one of the first practitioners to theorize language invention for fiction, most importantly in his paper “A Secret Vice” delivered at Pembroke College, Oxford, on November 29, 1931. In this talk Tolkien charts his own experience with early language play and invention, moving gradually from codes or replacement languages such as Animalic to languages that exhibited elements of unique phono-aesthetic qualities that Tolkien found attractive, such as “Naffarin” (see Tolkien, 2016). These early attempts would lead in circa 1915 to Tolkien inventing the earliest versions of his Elvish languages that, as they developed, would become inextricably connected to his world-building of Arda (see “Tolkien’s Arda” in this volume).

In “A Secret Vice” Tolkien outlined several key characteristics that invented languages for fiction should have, all of which are reflected in his own Elvish language invention. The first two of these are interrelated and mutually supporting: the creation of word forms that sound aesthetically pleasing and a sense of fitness between word form and meaning. These ideas are most prevalent in Tolkien’s Elvish language of Quenya, one of the main languages spoken by Tolkien’s Elves, and meant to reflect the highest and purest of his imagined beings. An example of this aesthetic can be seen in the first line of the Elvish poem “Namarië” from *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955): “Ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen, / yéni únótimë ve rámar aldaron!” (Tolkien, 2004: 377). As this line shows, Quenya words and names tend to contain open vowels reflecting the Finnish language sound aesthetic that Tolkien had found attractive from an early age.

A contrasting use of invented words with a different sound-sense to emphasize the nature of the peoples speaking it is evident in Tolkien's Black Speech (a language invented by the Dark Lord Sauron in mockery of the Elvish languages), as evident in the first line of the inscription on the Ring of Power with its use of harsh consonant clusters: "Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul" (Ibid.: 254). A third characteristic of Tolkien's language invention is his construction of elaborate grammars that very few previous inventors of fictional languages engaged with in such detail. Tolkien's language papers are still in the process of being published, and they reflect a rich corpus of phonologies, grammars, and word-lists from the different conceptual periods of Tolkien's creative work. The fourth characteristic that Tolkien emphasized is the intertwining of myth and language to create "an illusion of historicity" (Tolkien, 1981: 143) through which art-langs could imaginatively reflect how languages change over (hypothetical) time and through cross-migration of peoples. Tolkien used these four elements to invent a complex and detailed system of art-langs that reflected the different conceptual periods of Tolkien's creative development of his legendarium. As explored above, Tolkien focused on ensuring that the nomenclature that built his world, and appeared in such para-textual elements as maps and family trees, had a coherence and consistency as well as a dominant element of sound-symbolism by developing a series of base roots from which words and names were derived and could be traced back to. In the 1930s Tolkien expanded the two key strands of his Elvish language invention to reflect the growing world and cultures he was building. It would be this work that would first appear to readers in his two key published works *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955). Tolkien's use of invented languages to world-build up to this point is unique and would also greatly influence the art-languages for fiction that would follow him.

By the late 1960s, the aftermath of two World Wars, the advent of the Cold War, and growing political and social tensions became reflected in some of the key art-langs that were developed for dystopian fiction. A linguistic theory of the time that was used by several authors to conceptualize these types of art-langs is known as the "Sapir-Whorf" hypothesis. According to this theory, named after linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, the structure of language influences the modes of thought of the culture in which it is spoken. Authors of fiction would explore this concept in their world-building by reflecting the type of culture they invented in the vocabulary of the invented language. In his dystopian novel of the future, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (written in 1947–8), George Orwell imaginatively explored the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by depicting a linguistic horror in which thought is suppressed through the diminishment of words (and thus ideas) in the language of Newspeak. Orwell invented the *a posteriori* language of Newspeak to represent the thought control applied by "Big Brother" (IngSoc). As with other art-languages surveyed above, Orwell drew his inspiration for Newspeak from an attempt by a real-world philologist, C. K. Ogden, to distill the English language down into 850 core words, called "Basic English" (see Okrent, 2009: 139).

In *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) Anthony Burgess invented an *a posteriori* language called Nadsat that falls more into the category of slang, cant, or argot, from elements of Russian and Eastern European languages. Nadsat represents the rebellious language that Alex and his band of delinquent "droogs" speak. It is through Alex's first-person narration of the text in Nadsat that the reader becomes part of the dystopian and violent world of *A Clockwork Orange*. Another example of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis influencing the use of language in fiction is Jack Vance's *Languages of Pao* (1958) in which Vance explores how a whole race's mental framework can be converted from one of pacifism to one of aggression by changing the nature of the language the next generation of the Paonese is taught. This is achieved by developing a new language in which words and grammatical structure are designed to create

more aggressive feelings and attitudes among the new generation of learners. This use of language to change thinking prevents the planet of Pao from being invaded but also creates a new more aggressive race that becomes a threat itself.

In the late 20th century and up to the present day, language invention as part of world-building would ultimately become the domain of professional linguists hired by producers of motion-pictures, television shows, and computer games to include invented languages in the transmedial storytelling of such franchises as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and most recently George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series. With the rise of the Internet in the early 1990s, many of these art-languages would become part of online communities of fans who would both learn and use the languages as they engaged with, and built upon, these transmedial texts. For example, linguist Mark Okrand was hired to invent Klingon, an art-lang spoken by the fictional Klingons in the *Star Trek* universe, one of the largest and most popular science fiction franchises that has been created around a secondary world (see Mary McAuley's chapter in this volume, "Roddenberry's Star Trek Galaxy"). As Okrent (2009) has discussed, Klingon is one of the first art-languages that has truly superseded its role as a fictional language in a diegetic secondary world environment (the transmedial world of *Star Trek*) to become a language that is used in a community for social communication (in varying degrees) by a group of speakers who dress up as Klingons and celebrate the Klingon culture at conventions called "qep'a." What started as an art-language for fictional characters has now moved into the realm of a type of auxiliary language for communication among a group of people who are interacting and immersing themselves in the imaginary culture this language helped shape (see Okrent, 2009: 255–272). Another art-language that came out of a fictional television series was Paku, developed for the American television series *Land of the Lost* (1974–1976) in which the Marshalls, a family of modern explorers, become trapped in a prehistoric alternative universe, ostensibly revising the age-old traveler's tale trope for television. Paku was invented by a professor of linguistics, Victoria Fromkin, to be spoken by the small ape-like humanoids that the family encounters and befriends, the race of the Pakuni. To invent the dialogue Fromkin created an English-to-Paku dictionary (Conley and Cain, 2006: 107). In a similar fashion, in 2009, Paul Frommer, a professor at the USC Marshall School of Business with a doctorate in linguistics, invented Na'vi for the world-building of Pandora in the film and later transmedial computer game of *Avatar* (Wolf, 2012: 188).

Language invention has also been used in the world-building of computer games, from the earliest text-based world-building games to the massive multiplayer online games (MMOGs) of today, like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009). Gargesh, the language of Gargoyles in *Ultima IV* (1990), was one of the first languages developed for a video game. This *a posteriori* language was designed by Herman Miller and was intended to be difficult to learn. It features a flexible word order and parts of speech and tenses that are made clear through gestures and intonations. Another highly complex and enigmatic imaginary language is D'ni, which was invented for the immersive world of *Myst* (1993). D'ni was the diegetic language of an ancient race who had the ability to create portals to other worlds by writing about them in books. In the sequel to *Myst*, the video game *Riven* (1997), the player needed to understand the numeric system of D'ni to solve puzzles in the game. To aid the player, additional materials on D'ni were published giving clues as to how to read the language (see Portnow, 2011: 144–146; and Wolf, 2012: 228–229). To date, the most complex invented language created for a MMOG has been Logos, created for *Tabula Rasa* (2007), a MMOG that failed to catch on with players. Logos was designed to be a highly complex symbolic language that a player would master through immersing themselves in the environment of the online secondary world by collecting logos and symbols, which they would add to their Logos Table.

However, the game itself had many flaws and after investing millions in its production it was pulled after one year and taken offline in 2009 (see Portnow, 2011: 154–155). Current games like *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007) also use elements of Tolkien’s Elvish languages to build a virtual Middle-earth environment.

The most recent major example of language invention inextricably linked to world-building is Dothraki, which was created for HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011–present), the television adaptation of George R. R. Martin’s historical fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–present). In the novels, Dothraki is spoken by a population of Hun-like, loosely confederated tribes of horse-riding warriors who make their home on the steps of Essos in the invented world of Westeros. The Dothraki do not have a writing system or use books, and the language is used purely for day-to-day communication. In 2008, the creators of the HBO series D. B. Weiss and David Benioff approached the Language Creation Society about creating the Dothraki language which, in the first three volumes of his series, Martin gave a fairly small set of words and phrases for but did not invent as a language that could be used in dialogue. A contest of linguists from around the world was launched to invent this language. After two rounds of judging from among 30 language inventors, David J. Peterson’s 300-page Dothraki proposal was selected and he became the “inventor” of the dialogue for the pilot to the HBO series. The Sapir-Whorf element of the language can be seen in the Dothraki expression *Ana Dothrak Chek*, which is used for “I am fine” but literally means “I ride well,” indicating the centrality of the horse culture of the Dothraki people. The very name Dothraki comes from the verb “dorthralat,” to ride (Peterson, 2014: 37–38). For the last season of the HBO series, Peterson also developed another invented language, High Valyrian, which, again, is only mentioned in Martin’s original novels. In contrast to Dothraki, High Valyrian is meant to be a language used for learning and education among the nobility of Essos and Westeros, as well as in song and literature, not unlike the role that Tolkien’s Quenya would play in the Third Age of Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*. Peterson has gone on to invent languages for other transmedial world-building environments, including Castithan, Irathient, and Omec for a post-apocalyptic Earth in the science fiction television show *Defiance* (2013–2015) as well as the language of Dark Elves, Shivaith, for the Norse underworld of the movie *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) (see Peterson, 2015).

The interlacing of language invention with other elements of world-building is now a natural element of fantasy and science fiction texts. The prevalence of these languages attached to some of the most popular transmedial franchises of all time has also inspired people to invent their own languages not just for fiction (of all types) but also as a purely private pleasure. For example, the inventor of the art-language Dothraki (and many others) David Peterson has stated that he was inspired by a puzzling use of a word in one of the *Star Wars* languages used in *The Return of the Jedi* (1983) to start inventing his own languages (Peterson, 2015: 3–4). The Language Creation Society (<http://conlang.org>) currently lists hundreds of language inventors and books such as Mark Rosenfelder’s *Language Construction Kit* (2010) and David Peterson’s own *The Art of Language Invention* (2015) to give aspiring language inventors handbooks with which to invent new languages. Today, both in the Primary World and secondary worlds, language invention is being used not only for world-building but also to enhance, better describe, and illuminate the real world as well.

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