How to Create Your Own Language

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Thank you to…

- Anthropology in the Works for co-sponsoring!

1. Why construct a language?
2. How not to create your own language
3. How to create your own language
4. Workshop!

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- For fun/because you're interested in how language works
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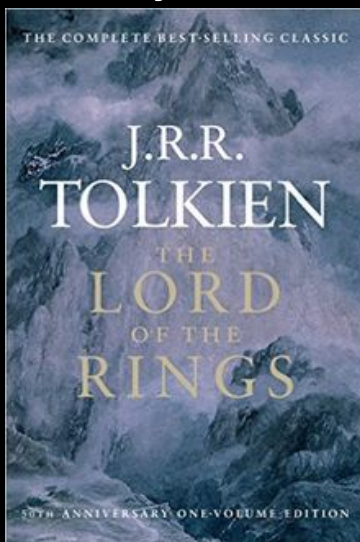
This was J.R.R. Tolkien's motivation

Why construct a language?

"what I think is a primary 'fact' about my work, that it is all of a piece, and fundamentally linguistic in inspiration. ... It is not a 'hobby', in the sense of something quite different from one's work, taken up as a relief-outlet. The invention of languages is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows."

The Letters of J.R.R.Tolkien, pp. 219–220 (retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_constructed_by_J._R._R._Tolkien)

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Secondary to Tolkien, but primary for many creators of famous conlangs inspired by Tolkien

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How not to create your own language

The Phrasebook Approach

STARGÅTE
SG·1

Goa'uld

Lots of individual phrases spread out across all the episodes
> *Kree!* (generic command)
> *Avidan* 'the gods are just'

Phrases seem to have been invented on a case-by-case basis, with single words with no structure standing in for whole phrases

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→ Real languages aren't like this,
and nor are "true" constructed
languages

How not to create your own language
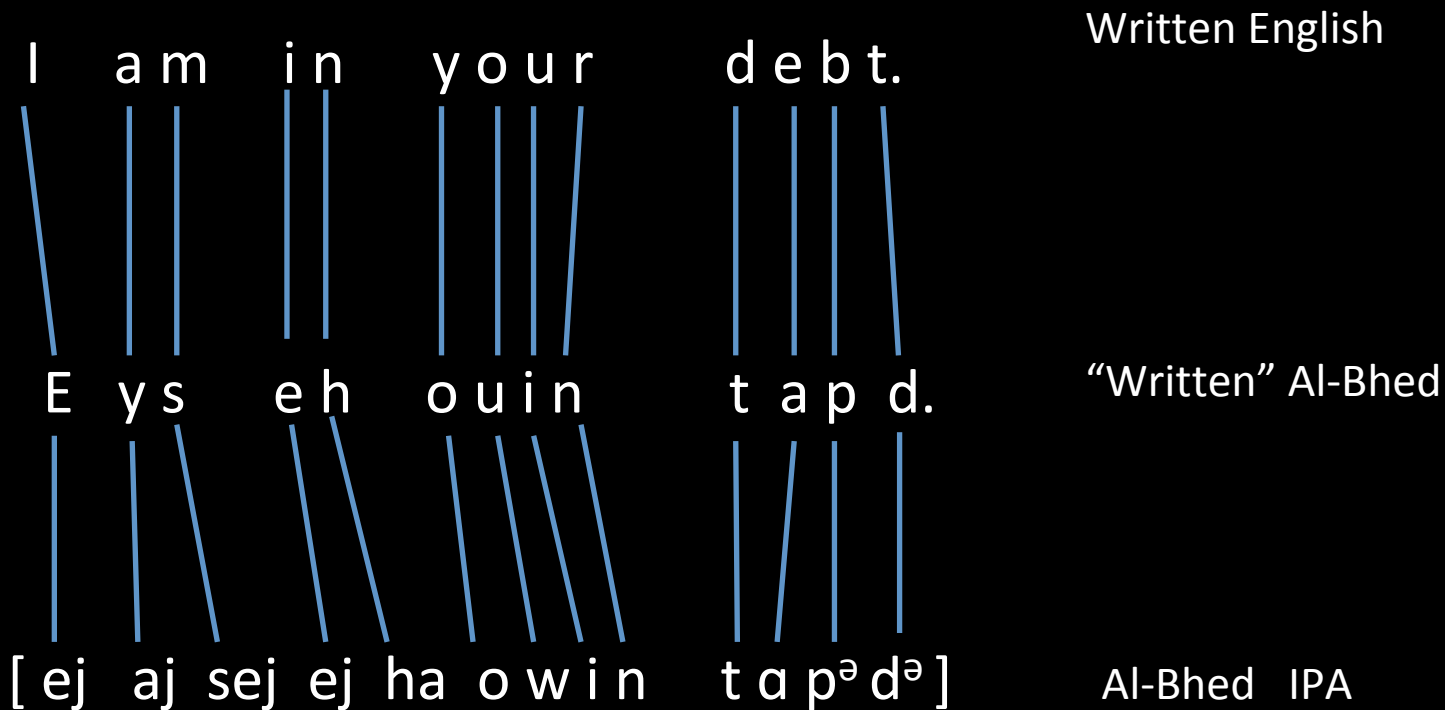
The Code Approach

The Code Approach

- Involves creating a simple substitution cipher for an existing language.

- Example: Al-Bhed from Final Fantasy X/X-2:

https://youtu.be/adIbNqo9eg4?t=32s

The Code Approach: Al-Bhed

I   a m   i n   y o u r   d e b t.   Written English

E   y s   e h   o u i n   t a p   d.   "Written" Al-Bhed

[ej   aj sej ej ha o w i n   t ɑ pᵊ dᵊ]   Al-Bhed   IPA

Translated at:
http://stefangagne.com/albhed.html

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- Al-Bhed is an ingenious game mechanic, but the Code Approach is unsatisfying as a general method for constructing a language (unless you're just after secrecy):
  - Not interesting from the point of view of how languages work: real languages are never codes for each other!!!
  - Only gives the *appearance* of depth to your fictional world, not actual depth (Al-Bhed is identical to English in almost all respects).

How to create your own language

The Complete Approach

Real Languages and "True" Constructed Languages

- Vocabulary
- Phonology
- Morphology (word-s have mean-ing-ful sub-part-s)
- Syntax (rules for combining words into sentences)
- Semantics (rules for calculating meaning compositionally)

Useful Resources

https://www.reddit.com/r/conlangs/

http://conlangery.com/

http://www.zompist.com/kitlong.html
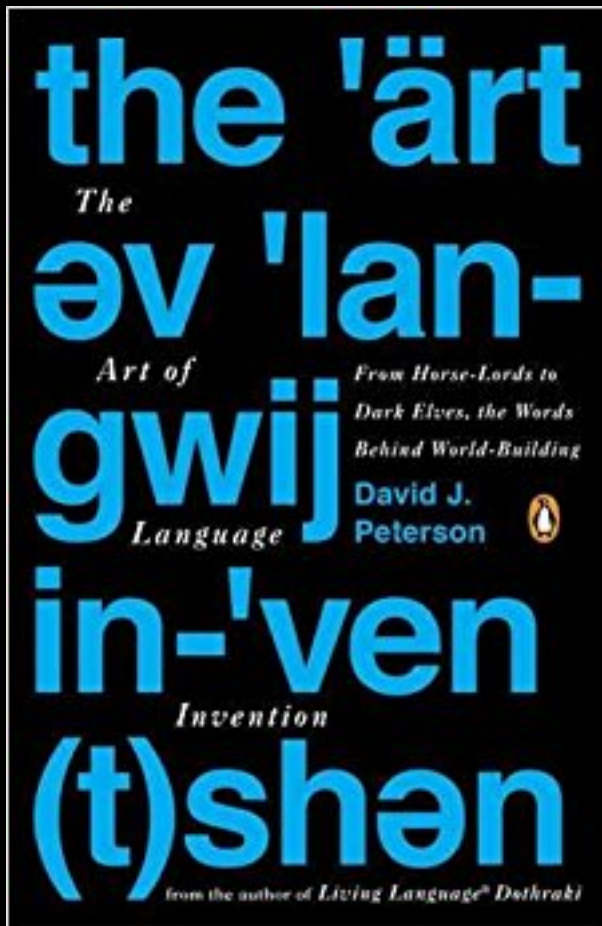
Examples

Before we get down to business, here are some details on a few famous conlangs, created using the Complete Approach, to inspire you

Klingon

(*Star Trek*)

Created by Marc Okrand in the early 1980s

		Labial	Dental / alveolar		Retroflex	Postalveolar / palatal	Velar	Uvular	Glottal
			central	lateral					
Plosive	voiceless	p /pʰ/	t /tʰ/					q /qʰ/	ˀ /ʔ/
	voiced	b /b/			D /ɖ/				
Affricate	voiceless			tlh /t͡ɬ/		ch /t͡ʃ/		Q /q͡χ/	
	voiced					j /d͡ʒ/			
Fricative	voiceless				S /ʂ/			H /χ/	
	voiced	v /v/						gh /ʁ/	
Nasal		m /m/	n /n/				ng /ŋ/		
Trill			r /r/						
Approximant		w /w/	(/ɹ/)	l /l/		y /j/			

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	voiced					j /d͡ʒ/			
Fricative	voiceless				S /ʂ/			H /χ/	
	voiced	v /v/						gh /ʁ/	
Nasal		m /m/	n /n/				ng /ŋ/		
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Phonaesthetics:
These sounds sound "harsh" to many English speakers (although there's nothing objectively harsh about them).

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Typologically rare Object-Verb-Subject order

lojmIt poSmoH ghot.				
lojmIt	**poS**	-	**moH**	**ghot**
door	to be open		+ causative	person

The person caused the door to be open.
The person opened the door.

Na'vi

(Avatar)

Created by Paul Frommer for the 2009 film *Avatar*

Type	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Ejective	px [p']	tx [t']		kx [k']	
Plosive	p [p]	t [t]		k [k]	' [ʔ]
Affricate		ts (c) [ts]			
Fricative	f [f] v [v]	s [s] z [z]			h [h]
Nasal	m [m]	n [n]		ng (g) [ŋ]	
Liquid/glide	w [w]	r [r] l [l]	y [j]		

https://learnnavi.org/

Na'vi

(*Avatar*)

Created by Paul Frommer for the 2009 film *Avatar*

taron [hunt] "hunts"

t⟨ìm⟩aron [hunt⟨REC⟩] "just hunted"

t⟨ay⟩aron [hunt⟨FUT⟩] "will hunt"

t⟨er⟩aron [hunt⟨IMPV⟩] "hunting"

t⟨ol⟩aron [hunt⟨PFV⟩] "hunted"

t⟨ì⟨r⟩m⟩aron [hunt⟨REC⟨IMPV⟩⟩] "was just hunting"

t⟨ìrm⟩ar⟨ei⟩on [hunt⟨REC.IMPV⟩⟨LAUD⟩] "was just hunting": The speaker is happy about it, whether due to success or just the pleasure of the hunt

t⟨ay⟩ar⟨äng⟩on [hunt⟨FUT⟩⟨PEJ⟩] "will hunt": The speaker is anxious about or bored by it

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Dothraki

(Game of Thrones)

Created by David J. Peterson (author of *The Art of Language Invention*), inspired by fifty-six individual words from George R. R. Martin's books.

Dothraki

(*Game of Thrones*)

Anha dothrak adakhataan.
'I'm about to eat.' (lit. 'I ride to eating.')

Anha dothrak adakhatoon.
'I just ate.' (lit. 'I ride from eating.')

The importance of horses in Dothraki culture has led to the verb *dothralat* 'to ride' to being incorporated into a number of Dothraki idioms and grammatical constructions.

Hash yer dothrae chek?
'How are you?' (lit. 'Do you ride well?')

Anha dothrak chek.
'I'm fine.' (lit. 'I ride well.')

Dothras chek.
'Be cool.' (lit. 'Ride well.')

Anha dothrak she vaesoon.
'I'm from the city.' (lit. 'I ride from the city.')

Workshop!