

The Linguistics of Constructed Languages

Course Number	L44 Ling 148	Instructor	Dr. Nick Danis
Semester	Fall 2020	Contact	nsdanis@wustl.edu
Time	10:00–11:20am	Office Location	January 206 / Zoom
Location	Busch 100 / Zoom	Office Hours	TBD

1 Description

What’s “wrong” with English, or French, or Chinese, or any one of the 6,000+ languages spoken natively by humans today? Why invent a language like Esperanto to be a common tongue among all people, or invent a “calculus of thought” to “perfectly” express pure meaning? Why is it hard to sound romantic while speaking Klingon? What are the benefits of Lojban’s attempt to rid the world of confusion and ambiguity?

This course explores the design of and motivation for constructed languages from a modern linguistic point of view. Constructed languages are those that are the result of some conscious and deliberate design rather than ones occurring naturally. We will explore the different motivations for language construction, from the desire to create a “perfect language”, to fictional worldbuilding, to fostering global harmony. In characterizing the different types of invented languages, students will develop familiarity with the basic tools of linguistic theory, focusing on phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Languages analyzed in detail include Klingon, Esperanto, Heptapod B, Lojban, Dothraki, Valyrian, Elvish, and various philosophical languages.

2 Course Goals

Throughout this course, students will:

- Explore and evaluate motivations for inventing new languages
- Compare and contrast invented languages to natural human languages
- Characterize and analyze the types of existing invented languages
- Become familiar with the fundamental tools of modern linguistic theory

3 Special covid-related policies

This course is in person with remote attendance welcome. All lectures are simulcast over Zoom, with asynchronous participation possible. In-person attendance will not be taken. Be smart and be safe about attending in person. If you do not attend in person, I strongly encourage synchronous remote participation if possible. If you cannot follow synchronously, please don’t let more than a few days lapse before viewing the lecture recording as it is easy to fall behind. Our assigned room is big enough to safely accommodate all enrolled, in-person attendees. Masks are required in the classroom (this goes for me as well). Please don’t hesitate to contact me about any issues that come up; I am happy to provide whatever accommodations are reasonable.

4 Materials

There are no required textbooks for this course. All necessary readings will be posted as PDFs on the course website. The majority of the readings, however, come from the following set of *recommended* readings. If you are looking for more in-depth coverage than what we go over in the course, you are encouraged to seek out the following:

- Arika Okrent (2009). *In the Land of Invented Languages*. New York: Spiegel & Grau. 342 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8129-8089-9 (ILIL)
- Michael Adams (2011). *From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages*. New York: Oxford University Press. 294 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-280709-0 (FEtK)
- Mark Rosenfelder (2010). *The Language Construction Kit*. Yonagu Books. 292 pp. ISBN: 978-0-9844700-0-6 (LCK)
- David J. Peterson (2015). *The Art of Language Invention: From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves, the Words Behind World-Building*. Penguin Publishing Group. 306 pp. ISBN: 978-0-14-312646-1 (ALI)

5 Grade

Your grade breakdown is shown below.

Item	Pct.
Participation	10%
Weekly Responses	40%
Writing Prompts ($\times 3$)	50%

Participation is crucial not only to your grade to the success of this course. There will invariably be a number of differing opinions on the material covered in this course and targeted discussion by all leads to a more a through understanding of it.

Each week, you will write a short response based both on the readings and the discussions in class. (Specific prompts will be given.) Part of this involves submitting discussion questions that will be covered in the next class.

The writing prompts will be short papers that act as responses, research reports, or position pieces based on the topics in class. More details will be given as the semester progresses.

Extra credit. As an opportunity for extra credit, you can make progress learning a constructed language online. There will be a Duolingo (<https://www.duolingo.com/>) classroom set up for this course, where you can take lessons in (as of January 2019) High Valyrian, Klingon, or Esperanto. This will be added as bonus participation. Check Canvas for the Duolingo links.

Letter grades are assigned based off the following scale. Numerical grades are **not** rounded.

100	\geq	A+	\geq	97	80	$>$	C+	\geq	77
97	$>$	A	\geq	93	77	$>$	C	\geq	73
93	$>$	A-	\geq	90	73	$>$	C-	\geq	70
90	$>$	B+	\geq	87	70	$>$	D+	\geq	67
87	$>$	B	\geq	83	67	$>$	D	\geq	63
83	$>$	B-	\geq	80	63	$>$	D-	\geq	60

If you are taking this class pass/fail, you must receive at least a C- (70%) to pass.

If you believe there has been an error in grading, I am happy to discuss it with you. However, you must bring it up to me within one week of the graded assignment being returned to you. After this, the grade is considered final.

The schedule that follows provides a preliminary sketch of the units in the course. Please check Canvas for the latest information on readings and assignments.

Schedule (tentative, always check Canvas for official dates and readings)

Week	Lesson	Languages	Reading
1	Natural vs Constructed vs Other Languages	English, Esperanto, Python	FETK ch 1, Bianco 2004
2	Motivations: Real Life	Esperanto	FETK ch 2
3	Motivations: Fiction	Dothraki, Klingon, Elvish	ALI ch. 1
4	Constructing a Language		LCK ch 1-2
5	Alien Languages	Klingon	Okrand 1985, FETK ch. 5
6	Languages Without Irregularity	Esperanto	Richardson 1988, LCK ch. 5
7	Language and Thought	Heptapod B	Chiang “Story of your Life”, Engle 2016, Koerner 1992
8	Unambiguous Languages	Lojban	Nicholas & Cowan 2003, Fromkin et al “Syntax”
9	Philosophical Languages	Wilkins	ILIL ch. 3-7
10	Historical Change	Elvish, Valyrian	ALI ch. 3
11	Constructed Writing Systems	Elvish, Hangel, Cherokee, Emoji	ALI ch. 4, Tolkien LoTR Appendix E-F, LCK
12	Revitalization and Nativization	Modern Hebrew, Esperanto	FETK ch. 8, Bergen 2001, Versteegh 1993, Warner et al 2007
13	Design over Function	<i>Star Wars</i>	Burt 2001
14	Early Conlangs	Lingua Ignota, Voynich Manuscript	Eco 1995

6 Academic Integrity

This course adheres to the university’s Academic Integrity Policy (<https://studentconduct.wustl.edu/academic-integrity/>), and takes cheating and plagiarism very seriously. All work completed online or outside of class must be done alone unless instructed otherwise, and no resources not approved by the instructor may be used during exams.

7 ADA Compliance

Washington University is committed to providing accommodations and/or services to students with documented disabilities. Students who are seeking support for a disability or a suspected disability

should contact Disability Resources at 935-4153. Disability Resources is responsible for approving all disability-related accommodations for WU students, and students are responsible for providing faculty members with formal documentation of their approved accommodations at least two weeks prior to using those accommodations. I will accept Disability Resources VISA forms by email and personal delivery. If you have already been approved for accommodations, I request that you provide me with a copy of your VISA within the first two weeks of the semester. Please see more information at <http://cornerstone.wustl.edu/>.

8 Sexual Assault Resources

The University is committed to offering reasonable academic accommodations (e.g., no contact order, course changes) to students who are victims of relationship or sexual violence, regardless of whether they seek criminal or disciplinary action. If you need to request such accommodations, please contact the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center (RSVP) at rsvpcenter@wustl.edu or 314-935-3445 to schedule an appointment with an RSVP confidential, licensed counselor. Information shared with counselors is confidential. However, requests for accommodations will be coordinated with the appropriate University administrators and faculty. Please see more information at <https://students.wustl.edu/relationship-sexual-violence-prevention-center/>