

Ling 148 The Linguistics of Constructed Languages

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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, Lang Belta, Lojban, Dothraki, Valyrian, Elvish, and various philosophical languages.

Course Info

Course Number	L44 Ling 148
Semester	Fall 2024
Time	MWF 9:00A-9:50A
Location	McDonnell 361
Office	January 206
Office Hours	Wednesdays 12-1pm
Homepage	https://wustl.instructure.com/courses/138846

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

Attendance and delivery

This course is taught in person, meaning all lectures occur live, in person, in the scheduled time and place. Lecture recordings, if made, will not be available by default, but this may change.

Because there is still an ongoing threat of covid-related infections, I expect there to be excused absences. Please respect all health guidelines this semester, and put your own health and the health of your peers above your academic obligations. I am happy to work with you. Please keep me notified of any health related absences, and if there are many, we will figure out a way to make it work for the class.

Required Materials

There are no required textbooks. All readings will be made available as PDFs on [Canvas](#). That being said, a fair amount of material comes from the following books, and you are encouraged to seek out the full books if you are looking for more detailed coverage:

- 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)

Grade

The grade breakdown is shown below.

Category	Pct
Weekly Responses	45%
Participation	10%
Writing Prompts	45%

Weekly Responses

Each week, there are a series of questions based on the assigned readings. These are usually due during the week, as the submissions will be incorporated into the following class. (On weeks with holidays, make sure you check Canvas for the due dates.)

Participation

In addition to being expected to participate in class, there are a number of graded participation assignments. These include surveys and occasional group work. All details will be given on Canvas.

Writing Prompts

There are 3 short writing prompts, and one final paper. There is roughly one prompt due each month. Details are given on Canvas. Each is worth 50 points. As general rules, each prompt should be either in MLA or APA format, with 12pt serif font, 1" margins on all sides, double-spaced. You are strongly encouraged to use the resources of the [Writing Center](#) here at Wash U. More details are given below.

The final paper is due during finals period. However, you are encouraged to read the description for the final paper and get a head start, especially if you wish to incorporate material from books, movies, or television shows.

Letter grades

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

$100 \geq A+ \geq 98$	$80 > C+ \geq 77$
$98 > A \geq 93$	$77 > C \geq 73$
$93 > A- \geq 90$	$73 > C- \geq 70$
$90 > B+ \geq 87$	$70 > D+ \geq 67$
$87 > B \geq 83$	$67 > D \geq 63$
$83 > B- \geq 80$	$63 > D- \geq 60$

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.

Late policy

Unexcused late work incurs a 5% penalty per day late. If you anticipate a problem submitting work on time, please email me **before the due date** and we can work something out.

Schedule

The exact schedule is likely to change as the semester progresses. Please see [Canvas](#) for all up-to-date readings and assignment due dates.

Week	Module	Languages
1	Natural vs. Constructed Languages	Esperanto
2	Real-world motivations*	Esperanto, Volapük
3	Fictional worldbuilding	Dothraki, Elvish languages, Klingon
4	Constructing a language	Dothraki, Klingon
5	Alien Languages	Klingon
6	Extreme Regularity	Esperanto

Week	Module	Languages
7	Form over Function*	Star Wars
8	Language and Thought	Heptapod B
9	Logic & Ambiguity	Loglan/Lojban
10	Philosophical Languages	Language of John Wilkins
11	Language Change & Evolution	High Valyrian, Lang Belta
12	Nativization & Revitalization	Esperanto, Lang Belta, Modern Hebrew
13	Writing Systems	Elvish languages
14	TBD*	TBD
15	Meaning & Metaphor	Tamarian

* Partial week due to holidays.

General policies

This course follows and takes seriously all policies on assault & harrassment, accommodations, academic integrity, and so on. In order to provide you with the most up to date material, I will link directly to the University guidelines below:

<https://provost.wustl.edu/syllabi-resources-and-template-language-danforth-campus/>

Please be familiar with these and don't hesitate to reach out if you ever have any related questions or concerns.

Last updated: August 26, 2024