

LING 1526 The Linguistics of Constructed Languages

Dr. Nick Danis, Washington University in St. Louis

Course number	LING 1526	Instructor	Nick Danis
Semester	Fall 2026	Contact	nsdanis@wustl.edu
Time	MWF 9-10am	Office	January 206
Location	Lopata Hall 103	Office hours	Th 10:30-11:30am
Website	https://wustl.instructure.com/courses/178033		

What's "wrong" with English, or French, or Chinese, or any one of the 6,000+ languages spokennatively by humans today? Why invent a language like Esperanto to be a common tongue amongall people, or invent a "calculus of thought" to "perfectly" express pure meaning? Why is it hard tosound romantic while speaking Klingon? What are the benefits of Lojban's attempt to rid theworld 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.

Goals

Throughout this course, students will:

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

Required Materials

Readings

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 WordsBehind World-Building*. Penguin Publishing Group. 306 pp. ISBN: 978-0-14-312646-1 (ALI)

Grade

The final grade is weighted as follows.

Category	Weight
Weekly Responses	20%
Writing Prompts	60%
Attendance and Discussions	20%

Weekly Responses

Each week, there are a number of questions based on the assigned readings for that week. Each question should be answered with a fully-formed paragraph (or thereabouts), with clear references to the readings when appropriate. Also, as part of the weekly responses, you are to submit open-ended discussion questions based on the material. These questions are then incorporated into the Friday class (see details in the Attendance and Discussion section below).

Writing Prompts

There will be two long-form writing prompts, each resulting in a short essay with a round of revisions each. The essays must be in MLA format, double-spaced in a 12 pt. serif font and 1" margins. You are strongly encouraged to utilize the existing resources at the Writing Center; more details are below.

Attendance and Discussion

In-person attendance is required for this course. However, be smart and put your health first. If you think you need to miss class for a health-related issue, please try to contact me **before** class time. Class sessions are not recorded by default. Attendance is taken every session in some form. A single unexcused absence will not count against your grade, but anything more will require documentation.

Additionally, Friday sessions are discussion days, based on the submitted questions from that week's responses. Each week will have a different pair of **discussion leaders**. I will lead the discussion the first week as a model, and from then on it will be student-led. The job of the discussion leaders is to compile that week's questions (they will be available on Canvas), group similar/related questions (often picking one version if several questions are very similar), order them in a way that seems the most natural, and present them to the class in a clear way (usually, one at a time in a slide show). During class, discussion leaders act as moderators, calling on others, offering their own thoughts, and so on. Each student must serve as discussion leader at least once.

Schedule

The schedule is likely to change specific to how the course progresses, below is only a rough guide.

Date	Day	Week	Topic	Languages
8/24/2026	M	1	Natural vs. Constructed Languages	
8/26/2026	W	1		
8/28/2026	F	1	Discussion: Instructor Led	
8/31/2026	M	2	Real-world Motivations	Esperanto, Volapük
9/2/2026	W	2		
9/4/2026	F	2	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
9/7/2026	M	3	NO CLASS – Labor Day	

Date	Day	Week	Topic	Languages
9/9/2026	W	3	Fictional worldbuilding	Dothraki, Elvish languages, Klingon
9/11/2026	F	3	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
9/14/2026	M	4	Constructing a language	Dothraki, Klingon
9/16/2026	W	4		
9/18/2026	F	4	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
9/21/2026	M	5	Alien languages	Klingon
9/23/2026	W	5		
9/25/2026	F	5	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
9/28/2026	M	6	Extreme regularity	Esperanto
9/30/2026	W	6		
10/2/2026	F	6	Discussion: Leaders TBD PROMPT 1 DUE	
10/5/2026	M	7	<i>NO CLASS – Fall Break</i>	
10/7/2026	W	7	Form over function	Languages of <i>Star Wars</i>
10/9/2026	F	7	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
10/12/2026	M	8	Language and thought	Heptapod B
10/14/2026	W	8		
10/16/2026	F	8	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
10/19/2026	M	9	Logic & Ambiguity	Loglan/Lojban
10/21/2026	W	9		
10/23/2026	F	9	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
10/26/2026	M	10	Philosophical Languages PROMPT 1 REVISIONS DUE	Language of John Wilkins
10/28/2026	W	10		
10/30/2026	F	10	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
11/2/2026	M	11	Language Change and Evolution	High Valyrian, Lang Belta
11/4/2026	W	11		
11/6/2026	F	11	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
11/9/2026	M	12	Nativization and Revitalization	Esperanto, Lang Belta, Modern Hebrew
11/11/2026	W	12		
11/13/2026	F	12	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
11/16/2026	M	13	Writing Systems PROMPT 2 DUE	Elvish languages
11/18/2026	W	13		
11/20/2026	F	13	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
11/23/2026	M	14		
11/25/2026	W	14	<i>NO CLASS – Thanksgiving Break</i>	
11/27/2026	F	14	<i>NO CLASS – Thanksgiving Break</i>	

Date	Day	Week	Topic	Languages
11/30/2026	M	15	Meaning and Metaphor	Tamarian
12/2/2026	W	15		
12/4/2026	F	15	Discussion: Leaders TBD	
12/7/2026	M	16	Topic TBD	
12/8/2026	Tu	16	Reading Days	
12/11/2026	F	17	PROMPT 2 REVISIONS DUE	

Policy on the use of AI

The use of AI (large language model based tools) in this class is not permitted. The collection, synthesis and analysis of information from a variety of sources is a core skill and it is antithetical to the goals of this course to outsource that to a large language model. Additionally, avoid AI-based tools to “improve” your writing, even if you have offered the original thought. We will collaborate in class on such issues.

Further, as a student in this course (and most courses), any and all work submitted by you must be original. Directly submitting the output of some LLM as your own, or submitting work that contains obvious and nontrivial contributions from AI constitutes a violation of the academic integrity policy.

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.

Academic Integrity

In all academic work, the ideas and contributions of others (including generative artificial intelligence) must be appropriately acknowledged and work that is presented as original must be, in fact, original. You should familiarize yourself with the appropriate academic integrity policies of your academic program(s).

Generative AI Use is Restricted Completely

It is vital to learn the fundamental concepts and develop the critical skills of our field without using outside aids. Part of that learning process involves thinking through and processing challenging material without any help from generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Work produced by GenAI typically reuses information and language from external sources without citation and thus the submission of any work created in whole or in part by GenAI tools cannot be considered to be original in our course setting. Keep in mind that coursework produced with GenAI could violate ethical standards as well. I therefore ask that you do not make use of any GenAI to help complete any work in this course. The use of GenAI in this course will be considered an academic integrity violation and would be referred to the university academic integrity process. Violations could potentially result in grade penalties, such as a zero on the assignment, and/or other university-level sanctions.

Unauthorized Recording And Distribution Of Classroom Activities & Materials

Except as otherwise expressly authorized by the instructor or the university, students may not record, stream, reproduce, display, publish or further distribute any classroom activities or course materials. This includes lectures, class discussions, advising meetings, office hours, assessments, problems, answers, presentations, slides, screenshots or other materials presented as part of the course. If a student with a disability wishes to request the use of assistive technology as a reasonable accommodation, the student must first contact the Office of Disability Resources to seek approval. If recording is permitted, unauthorized use or distribution of recordings is also prohibited.

Disability Resources (DR)

WashU supports the right of all enrolled students to an equitable educational opportunity and strives to create an inclusive learning environment. In the event a physical or online environment, learning activity, or learning interaction results in barriers to your inclusion due to a disability, please contact WashU's Disability Resources (DR) to engage in a process for determining and communicating approved accommodations. As soon as possible after receiving an accommodation from DR, send me your WashU Accommodation Letter. Because accommodations are not applied retroactively, initiate your request to DR prior to, or at the beginning of, the academic term to avoid delays in accessing accommodations once classes begin.

<https://disability.wustl.edu/>

Sexual Harassment And Assault

If you are a victim of sexual discrimination, harassment or violence, we encourage you to speak with someone as soon as possible. Understand that if you choose to speak to me as an instructor, I must report your disclosure to my department chair, dean, or the Gender Equity and Title IX Compliance Officer, which may trigger an investigation into the incident. You may also reach out to the Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) Center to discuss your rights and your options with individuals who are not mandatory reporters.

<https://titleix.wustl.edu/students/confidentiality-resources-support/>

Religious Holidays

To ensure that accommodations may be made for students who miss class, assignments, or exams to observe a religious holiday, you must inform me in writing before the end of the third week of class, or as soon as possible if the holiday occurs during the first three weeks of the semester. For more information, please see the university's Religious Holiday Class Absence Policy (<https://bulletin.wustl.edu/washu/calendar/Religious-Holidays.pdf>).

Emergency Preparedness

Classroom and student safety will always come first. Students are reminded to review emergency preparedness and response actions at emergency.washu.edu and to familiarize yourself with the building(s) that you frequent. Know the layout, including exits, stairwells and the Emergency Assembly Point (EAP). If an emergency occurs during class, we will stop instruction, assess the situation, and respond accordingly, including following any instructions provided in a WashU Alert message or noted on <https://emergency.washu.edu>. Additionally, to ensure receipt of all WashU Alerts, students should ensure contact information in Workday Student is current and download the WashU Safe App.

To report an emergency:

- Danforth Campus – (314) 935-5555
- School of Medicine Campus – (314) 362-4357
- North/West/South and Off Campus – 911 then (314) 935-5555

Resources for Students

WashU provides a wealth of support services that address academic, personal, and professional needs. To start exploring resources that can help you along the way, please visit: <https://provost.washu.edu/resources/instructor-resources/student-resources/>