

LING 4850 Seminar: Constructed Languages (Conlangs)

Dr. Nick Danis, Washington University in St. Louis

Course number	LING 4850	Instructor	Nick Danis
Semester	Fall 2026	Contact	nsdanis@wustl.edu
Time	MW 2:30pm-4pm	Office	January 206
Location	Jubel 121	Office hours	Th 12:30-1:30pm
Website	https://wustl.instructure.com/courses/178059		

This course examines the history, structure, and use of various constructed languages (or conlangs) from a variety of perspectives. The central focus is on those conlangs whose design is informed by the linguistic typology of natural languages, such as Esperanto, Loglan/Lojban, Klingon, various Elvish languages, Dothraki, among others. Students receive hands-on experience designing and constructing a language from the ground up (conlanging), in addition to tackling questions like: what is a possible human language? What makes a conlang intended to be alien truly different from human language? Could a human reasonably learn these conlangs natively? And what has happened when people have actually tried? Prerequisites: LING 1600 and at least one of LING 3050, LING 3150, LING 3350, or LING 3450.

Goals

- 1.
2. Critically explore the history and motivations for language construction
3. Collaborately design a constructed language from the ground up

Required Materials

There are no required materials. Anything necessary will be posted on the course website.

Readings

The majority of readings come from the following books. The enthusiastic student is encouraged to seek out the full texts should they have additional interest.

- Michael Adams (2011). *From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages*. New York: Oxford University Press. 294 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-280709-0
- Umberto Eco (1993). *The Search for the Perfect Language*. ISBN: 0-631-17465-6.
- Arika Okrent (2009). *In the Land of Invented Languages*. New York: Spiegel & Grau. 342 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8129-8089-9
- 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
- Jeffrey Punske, Nathan Sanders, and Amy V. Fountain (eds.) (2020). *Language Invention in Linguistics Pedagogy*. ISBN: 9780198829881.
- Mark Rosenfelder (2010). *The Language Construction Kit*. Yonagu Books. 292 pp. ISBN: 978-0-9844700-0-6

Attendance and delivery

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, but if you have an extended, excused period of absence, arrangements can be made. Attendance is taken every session in some form. A single unexcused absence will not count against your grade, but anything more will require documentation.

Grade

The final grade is weighted as follows.

Category	Weight
Participation	20%
Conlang Workshops	30%
Homeworks	30%
Final Project	20%

All students are expected to do the assigned readings and contribute in class. On Wednesdays, the class is geared towards group conlanging exercises. Occasionally, progress reports will be submitted as part of the Conlang Workshops category. The final project is a (partial) reference grammar of your conlang.

Schedule

The schedule will be updated with specific readings and assignments as the semester progresses; below is only a rough guide.

Date	Week	Monday	Wednesday
8/24/2026	1	Introduction	Group Conlanging
8/31/2026	2	History and Motivations	Group Conlanging
9/7/2026	3	NO CLASS – Labor Day	Group Conlanging
9/14/2026	4	History and Motivations	Group Conlanging
9/21/2026	5	History and Motivations	Group Conlanging
9/28/2026	6	Linguistic Typology	Group Conlanging
10/5/2026	7	NO CLASS – Fall Break	Group Presentations
10/12/2026	8	Linguistic Typology	Group Presentations
10/19/2026	9	Linguistic Typology	Individual Conlanging
10/26/2026	10	Linguistic Typology	Individual Conlanging
11/2/2026	11	Linguistic Typology	Individual Conlanging
11/9/2026	12	Modern Studies	Individual Conlanging
11/16/2026	13	Modern Studies	Individual Conlanging
11/23/2026	14	Modern Studies	NO CLASS – Thanksgiving Break
11/30/2026	15	Modern Studies	Individual Conlanging
12/7/2026	16	Modern Studies	
12/14/2026	17	Final Exams	

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/>