

# AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PECULIARITIES OF FICTIONAL LANGUAGES

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*Potrivit datelor statistice, actualmente, în lume există peste 7000 de limbi naturale și aproximativ 1000 de limbi construite. În timp ce esperanto, limbile elfe sau klingoniana au existat de ceva timp, recent au apărut mai multe limbi construite. În pofida acestui fapt, numărul lingviștilor care să fi investigat aspectele socio-istorice, lingvistice, stilistice și terminologice legate de aceste limbi inventate este redus și modul în care acestea sunt traduse încă rămâne un teritoriu neexplorat. Prezentul articol este o prezentare succintă a originii, evoluției și scopurilor pentru care au fost construite limbile date, care se axează pe clasificarea lor, încadrarea lor în operele de ficțiune și provocările legate de traducere.*

*Cuvinte-cheie: limbi naturale, limbi construite, ficțiune, traducere, strategii*

There are currently more than 7000 living and dynamic languages in the world according to the Ethnologue and almost 40% of them are endangered [24]. Regardless of their origin, they enable people to communicate and interact, but also, to conduct research and analysis and create new ones.

These newly created or artificial languages have emerged for various communicative, learning and cultural purposes, including entertainment and fun. Some authors call them ‘fictional languages’, while others employ the term ‘auxiliary languages’ or ‘constructed languages (conlangs)’. The fact that their morphology or phonology was invented by a person or a group of people (or, as L. Trask has put it – “deliberately invented by a particular person” [20, p. 24]) and they were not left to develop typically makes them different from the natural languages.

The term “constructed language”, as mentioned in the work of M. Adelman *Constructed Languages and Copyright: A Brief History and Proposal for Divorce* [2, p. 545] is used to denote a language that has a phonology, morphology, syntax, and sometimes an alphabet attributed to an individual human inventor. According to the author, Otto Jespersen was the first who coined the term in 1928 in a text where he introduced his own

constructed language, called 'Novial'. In his works, the linguist expressed his conviction that an auxiliary language should be one which is based on the material of the European languages but which should be regularly constructed and should be independent of national usages, with a complete grammar of its own. It should have its roots in the European languages and yet be autonomous in its own structure. The constructed auxiliary language should be neutral and should serve as a second language beside the mother tongue [23].

In his paper *Reality in Fantasy: Linguistic Analysis of Fictional Languages*, M. Destruel [7, p.1] states that the term 'constructed languages' is indeed the preferred term used in relation to artificial languages, whereas terms like 'auxiliary languages' or 'fictional languages' denote subcategories of constructed languages. On the other hand, I. Stria suggests that the term 'imaginary' is preferred to 'artificial' or 'invented' because it stresses the role of fantasy and imagination in the process of creation of fictitious languages [18, p.30]. While the term 'artificial language' is a close synonym to constructed languages, some linguists believe the term 'artificial' carries a pejorative connotation and therefore should be avoided. Other linguists prefer the terms 'invented language' or 'planned language' [2, p.545].

The famous Dutch linguist Marc van Oostendorp wrote an article in 2000 entitled *Constructed language and linguistic theory* [14, p.2] in which he claims that one should differentiate between 'actual languages', 'possible languages' and 'impossible languages'. So, the author makes a distinction between these categories, claiming that natural languages are actual, while any constructed language can be either possible or impossible. Only the possible languages might grow into an actual language, like for instance, Esperanto, which, in a way, functions as a language and has proven that it always was a possible language.

It has to be mentioned, though, that nowadays, artificial languages are not a common research topic in linguistics, though one of the earliest researches on artificial languages was conducted by the American psychologist Erwin Allen Esper in 1925. Moreover, many linguists have ignored them and have adopted a sceptical, unserious attitude towards them, considering that they do not deserve close attention. It was highlighted that this viewpoint is valid for both fictional languages and languages such as Esperanto. For instance, while being interviewed by M. Aronoff, a linguistics professor at Stony Brook University in NY, N. Chomsky goes saying that "*Esperanto is not a language. It's just parasitic on other languages. Then comes a question, which is not a linguistic question, but a question of practical utility. Is it more efficient to teach people a system which is parasitic on actual languages, and somewhat simplifies, eliminating some of the details*

*of actual historical languages; or is it just more efficient to have then a whole lot of languages?* [27].

Besides, K. Malmkjær, a professor of translation studies from the University of Leicester believes [13, p.51] that since there is a number of natural languages, including English, used as international means of communication and, given the availability of well-qualified translators and interpreters, most probably the pursuit of artificial languages will remain a minority occupation.

Yet, artificial languages are of interest to some researchers and even if they are created, they still follow the same rules as the natural languages. And contrary to the aforementioned opinions, J. R. R. Tolkien, the greatest inventor of fictional languages, indicates in his essay *A Secret Vice* [19, p. 198] that he “is a believer in an ‘artificial language’ [...] necessary for uniting Europe [...]”.

So, what is an artificial language and what is the value of creating one? There is no comprehensive definition of this term, however, we shall highlight the contributions of some authors who have expressed their understanding in relation to this concept. For instance, K. Malmkjær [13, p. 47] considers that “an artificial language is one that has been created for some specific purpose or reason, as opposed to a natural language, such as those spoken by most speech communities around the world, which is normally thought of as having evolved along with its speech community, and for which it is not possible to find some ultimate source of creation”, while the following definition can be found in the Encyclopedia for Language and Linguistics: “an artificial language is a language that has been deliberately designed for a purpose by one person or a small group of people over a relatively short period of time” [4]. Another definition is the one provided by the online version of the Columbia Encyclopedia: “an artificial language is an idiom that has not developed in a speech community like a natural tongue, but has been constructed by human agents from various materials, such as devised signs, elements or modified elements taken from existing natural languages, and invented forms” [21].

In fact, these languages are not often holistic, since they can be composed just of a list of words, or they can be created to be just written, but not spoken [3, p. 6].

Constructed languages fall into two categories, depending on the purpose of their creation and their structure. The first comprises three subtypes – **engineered** (invented for specific linguistic or scientific aims), **auxiliary** (invented to be used in communication) and **artistic** (invented for fiction), while the second encompasses **a posteriori** and **a priori languages**. The ‘a posteriori’ languages use elements from the existing languages and

build their linguistic core on established vocabulary, grammar rules and sentence structure. The most prominent example would be Esperanto, which, although artificial, is spoken by a great number of people, including native speakers. The ‘a priori’ are languages with an original structure and features. Even if they adopt the vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar from existing languages – it is in a smaller amount. Many artistic or fictional languages such as Klingon, Dothraki, Valyrian, and Tolkien’s myriad of languages were created as a priori – with their own grammar, vocabulary and writing script [22].

As it was pointed out, artificial languages are often engineered and used in research to examine specific aspects and phenomena. The research using artificial languages can systematically vary linguistic parameters to facilitate investigations into the specific characteristics of languages and learners that contribute to effective word learning [12]. Recently, a new valuable direction in the area of language development has emerged called “Artificial Language Learning” which enables learners to be taught miniature constructed languages in a controlled laboratory setting [5], [10].

The auxiliary languages, that are culturally neutral or simple languages for use between native speakers of different languages constitute the largest class of constructed languages. They would commonly be known as International Auxiliary Languages (IALs). Before the beginning of World War II, there were over two hundred IALs [2, p. 547]. Of all IALs, Esperanto is the most famous. The UN recognised it as an IAL in 1954, while the Scottish author W. Aud, who wrote mainly in Esperanto, was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999, 2004 and 2006.

As regards the fictional works including literature, television, and film, the fictional languages serve as a tool that aim to bring a sense of authenticity to the fictional world and they act to help add a realistic element to the sociolinguistic aspects of the world, as dialects of a language may be used to illustrate social standing [17].

Several authors of fantasy literature and science fiction have created fictional languages, which form an integral part of their work. Probably the best known of these languages is *Elvish*, found in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, *Klingon*, an extra-terrestrial language used by Aliens, found in the popular science fiction television series *Star Trek* or *Dothraki* and *Valyrian*, used in “*Game of Thrones*”.

Often authors only mention an imaginary language, without necessarily giving any samples of that language in their narratives. Nevertheless, by ascribing to them particular qualities and values, such merely named languages can still be used to characterise their speakers and their culture. Tolkien did not only invent names, but also complete

vocabularies, phonologies, grammars, visual writing systems, and other paratextual documents. Tolkien's legacy of detailed language invention is clear in the work of Ursula K. Le Guin, Tom Shippey, and more recently Mark Okrand and David J. Peterson [9, p. 22].

Language invention has had a long history and has occupied the minds of many brilliant people. There is a great number and variety of artificial languages that emerged and because it's not possible to describe them briefly, we will enumerate just a few.

One of the oldest constructed language is **Lingua Ignota** created in the 12th century by a German abbess named Hildegard von Bingen. It comprised about 1000 words. Next, the medieval philosopher Ramon Llull who lived in the 12-13th c. wrote "*Ars Magna*", a work through which "he wanted to invent a kind of universal language that could convince anyone of the truth of the Christian religion on the basis of rigorous mathematical calculation" [8, p. 48].

**Volapuk** was invented in 1879 by a Catholic priest and became an a posteriori language that started fading with the rise of the artificial language Esperanto (1887), deliberately created to have highly regular morphological and syntactic rules, began to be taught in parts of Europe to help students understand parts of speech in their mother tongue, as well as to learn other Romance languages. Later on, Esperanto has given rise to numerous derivatives, the most important being **Ido** (1907) [4].

From the point of view of language creation, the twentieth century is known as the period of emergence of artistic languages. The first famous author to use a constructed language was J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien's deep knowledge of language and attention to detail lent his constructed languages significant verisimilitude, which set the standard for conlangs ever since, inspiring the creation of more sophisticated, more realistic conlangs in science fiction and fantasy, such as Paul Frommer's Na'vi (*Avatar*) and David J. Peterson's Dothraki and Valyrian (*Game of Thrones*) [16, p. 194].

As D. J. Peterson mentions in his book *The Art of Language Invention* [15, p. 17], in addition to being the first person on record to create a full language for a fictional context, Tolkien also created a language family. Tolkien's two most famous languages, **Quenya** and **Sindarin**, descend from a common ancestor and themselves have languages that have descended from them, and other languages to which they are related, similar to how natural languages evolve.

Tolkien mentioned in his writings that he was influenced by Finnish, Welsh, German, Latin and Greek when he invented the multitude of languages for his mythology. For instance, Sindarin was designed to have a Welsh-like phonology and is mainly analytic. Most probably, this constructed

language was also influenced by the Germanic languages as well. Quenya's creation was influenced by Finnish, Latin and Greek. The surprising thing is that Quenya is an agglutinating language. Tolkien's Men and Hobbits speak **Westron**, known as the common or universal speech of Middle Earth.

Concerning the **Klingon** language, it was created by the professional linguist Dr. Marc Okrand to add realism to a race of fictional aliens who inhabit the world of *Star Trek*, an American television and movie franchise. It has its own vocabulary, grammar, figures of speech, and even slang and regional dialects. A Klingon Dictionary was published in 1985 and the Klingon Language Institute was created in 1992 to promote publications, language proficiency certification, and annual conferences in Klingon [25].

The other two popular constructed languages are **Dothraki** (an inflectional language with over 3000 words and phrases) and **Valyrian** (based on Latin and contains more than 600 words). They were created for Game of Thrones by D. J. Peterson who was inspired by George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as well as languages such as Estonian, Inuktitut, Turkish, Russian, and Swahili. They are usually regarded as the most realistic and popular fictional tongues since Quenya and Sindarin. The American publisher Living Language, for instance, produced a course for learning Dothraki, while the Company Duolingo offers a course in Valyrian.

As concerns the translation of artificial language lines into the target language in a film, for example, their conveyance is usually as much faithful as possible to the original version, the authors or the creators producing an adaptation which reflects the primary meaning of what was said or uttered (they are rendered into English or left untranslated, however, the viewers will comprehend effortlessly what is the meaning because there'll be someone in the film conveying the message, thus, playing the role of an interpreter). As observed in the case of Tolkien's translations, some of the artificial language lines are left untranslated in the Romanian version since they don't have an equivalent in the English language either.

In spite of many linguists'<sup>3</sup> long negative attitudes towards the constructed languages, fictive languages deserve being investigated more thoroughly because they are "curious artefacts of culture" [1, p. 2] and each invented language demonstrated their authors' deep sense of language and their desire to make the language and the world better (unified). There's a need to have a change and look at the positive contribution that artificial

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<sup>3</sup> In a famous 2003 interview Noam Chomsky notoriously expresses this viewpoint in the second season of Da Ali G Show, by telling Ali G that 'you can create a new language if you like, and nobody will pay the slightest attention to you, because it would just be a waste of time'.

languages could bring to linguistics. Today, creators are more inclined to construct languages for the science fiction and fantasy rather than promoting a universal language, because we are all aware that English became dominant in the international communication. However, the focus shall be on use of these languages for research and artistic goals and as Peterson mentions, “Language creation is an art that can be benefited by understanding some linguistic principles. It's like a video game. A video game is a work of art, but there's a lot of real science that goes into understanding how code works, etc. The same is true of language creation. Certainly, a thorough grounding in linguistics will help you, but it isn't sufficient. It's easy to create a functional language; very difficult to create a good one” [26].

The involvement of a creator does not end when the first book or article describing the constructed language is published. Creators of constructed languages take great interest in how these languages are distributed and developed by subsequent users. Some are content to allow users of their constructed language free reign to publish modifications or supplements to the original. But others believe it is possible to control, via copyright, who is allowed to publish regarding the language [2, p. 549].

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