Parlez-vous Valyrian? Meet the people creating languages for Game of Thrones, Avatar and more

Half a million Duolingo users are currently learning High Valyrian. But how do you make a language out of nothing? The linguists behind top fantasy TV shows and films explain

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A language offers clues to the culture of its speakers, then the experience of learning Game of Thrones’ High Valyrian on Duolingo conjures visions of a bustling historic civilisation in which owls stalk the skies, magic abounds, and the spectre of death forever haunts the imaginations of the living. You learn to say “The woman is sweating” before that most basic greeting, “Hello”. An incongruously cheerful cartoon asks you to translate “All men must die, goodbye.” And, of course: “Nuhy zaldrizese gevi issi.” (“My dragons are beautiful”).

Described in George RR Martin’s books as the language of the dragon-taming rulers of a once-great empire, Old Valyria has been compared to the Roman Republic, and High Valyrian to classical Latin. The language only assumed full life when linguist David J Peterson took it on for season three of the television series in 2012. Working from the few High Valyrian phrases mentioned in the book - names, places, and the infamous strapline, “Valar Morghulis” (“All men must die”) - Peterson created an entire language. The Duolingo course was launched in 2017.

Things have picked up at astonishing speed. Peterson, described by the LA Times as “Hollywood’s go-to language guy”, makes languages for television and film full time. Other academics are involved, birthing an unlikely bond between linguistics scholars and Hollywood. What was initially a niche preserve has now become a global industry with an ever-growing community. I assumed that the number of Valyrian learners on Duolingo would be quite small; the company has reported it has more than 500,000 learners worldwide.
The idea that blockbuster fantasy productions would not only call for the creation of sets, props, and costumes but also original languages first arrived with Klingon, the alien Star Trek language created by linguist Marc Okrand in 1964 (you can also learn Klingon on Duolingo). Before that, “there was this idea that if you’re going to have aliens speaking some sort of constructed language, just have them babble,” says Paul Frommer, communications professor at the University of Southern California. “Ever since Klingon, that is absolutely a no-go.”

In 2005, Frommer was forwarded an email from James Cameron’s production company, which was seeking a linguist to develop a language for an unnamed science fiction project. Frommer applied, met with Cameron, and began work on the language that is now known as Avatar’s Na’vi. “My life has not been the same since,” he says.

How does someone make a language out of nothing? “It wasn’t a completely blank slate,” Frommer says. Cameron had some criteria: he wanted the language to be entirely new, sound nice, and had come up with about 30 words of its own. There was also the plot to consider. In the first Avatar film, the human protagonist successfully learns the language, so Na’vi would have to be “learnable by humans”. It sounds like a minor point, but Frommer explains it was crucial to the language’s construction: “Any linguist would be able to come up with a logical language, but it might be so utterly non-human that no human being could ever learn it.”

With these boundaries in place, he continues, “there are some fairly well-defined steps that most people who construct languages go through”. First, to determine how it would sound – which speech sounds to include and which to exclude. Then, “What are your verbs going to look like? What are your nouns going to look like?” – which requires thinking about common word endings and how tenses will change words.

There is determining the syntax and grammar to think about, and then finally, “maybe the most interesting part”: considering “the relationship between language and culture, language and environment”. Frommer came up with words to reflect the importance of ecology to the Na’vi, and since ceremonies are important in the culture, he also created a different “register” for words spoken in that context. Much like how we would use “mother and father” over “mum and dad” in a more formal setting, the Na’vi have different words for “I” and “you” during ceremonies.

It is strikingly detailed labour for something that will be missed by most viewers. “Ninety-eight percent of viewers are never going to know 99 percent of what we do,” says linguist Jessie Sams, the partner of Game of Thrones’ Peterson (in both life and work, they confirm cheerily, after I awkwardly ask for clarification); the two have since developed the languages in Dune, The Witcher, and Vampire Academy. “It doesn’t matter if people don’t really notice it at the time,” Peterson says, “it’s always going to be there. And so at some point in time, if somebody decides to analyse it, it’s going to hold up or it’s not.” (He recalls watching a Star Trek episode in which the actor for a highly intelligent character mispronounces a word.)

Their involvement with projects varies greatly, from working with dialect coaches, to meeting with actors, or being around on set. Ideally, they would get six months to a year to create a language; more often, they’re given two or three. How do they account for the spiralling demand for their services? “Game of Thrones was so big that everyone wanted to hire everybody who worked on Game of Thrones” Petersen says. “That’s why I got my second, fourth, and 15th job.”
In spite of the explosion of interest in constructed languages - a term creators tend to prefer over "fictitious" languages, given some now have very real and very fluent speakers - one may still wonder why someone would learn a language from science fiction over one widely spoken in this world, and whether this all comes at the expense of supporting endangered languages.

The answer is more complicated. Klingon, Na'vi and High Valyrian are small touchstones in the broader work of language creators, who share a more general interest in language learning, experimentation and preservation. The most widely spoken constructed language, Esperanto, was created in the 1880s with the hope of being a universal mode of communication. And perhaps the most famous language creator, JRR Tolkien, started inventing languages as early as 13 years old in a lifetime marked by an endless curiosity with the power of words across the (middle) earth, studying ancient Greek, Old English, Norse, Gothic, Welsh, and Finnish.

The language creators I spoke to command an intimidatingly long list of fluencies, while Okrand, the Klingon creator, focused on Native American languages as an academic. Christine Schreyer, a linguistic anthropologist at the University of British Columbia who has created languages for the Justice League and Man of Steel films, first came to the attention of Hollywood after publishing a research project on people learning Na’vi.

“I remember someone saying, ‘I’m learning Na’vi because I feel like I can, but if I tried to learn Navajo, which is also very interesting and complex, I would feel like it’s cultural appropriation,’” she says. Then there are more pragmatic motivations: “There were a lot of Russians. They said they were learning because the captions from Avatar were so terrible that they had to learn Na’vi to figure out the plot.”

Schreyer works on language revitalisation with indigenous Tlingit communities in British Columbia, and has recently researched how the models of fandom and community in the constructed language world can be applied for endangered languages: the result of which includes a website for the Tlingit language learning directly modelled after one for Na’vi. “Younger people in the community are fans of their language,” Schreyer says, and “are doing all of those things that Na’vi fans have done before”. As a university professor, she sees first-hand the rising interest in constructed languages: a test course she ran in 2010 had nine students. “We’ve run it every two years since then, and it’s always full. I have students tell me they’ve come to the university to take that class with me.”

Hollywood, then, is only a small part of the story. The full scale of the constructed language world and its many different faces and projects becomes more apparent when I watch a film documentary produced by and about the community, Conlanging: The Art of Crafting Tongues. Adults from around the world remember the languages they created as children in their
bedrooms; an artist creates drawings using a Cherokee writing system constructed in the 1800s; a woman tests whether it is possible to make up a language entirely without verbs.

“They’re not just alien adventure films any more,” Schreyer says of the commissions coming in from the entertainment industry, mentioning a prehistoric human language she developed for 2018 science fiction film Alpha. Besides, far from the allure of the screen, she says, “people have always been making languages. Now it’s more in the open.”

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