

CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGES: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, FUNCTION AND APPEAL – A LITERATURE REVIEW¹

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Abstract: *This article provides a literature review of constructed languages, exploring their historical background and distinguishing them from artificial languages. It includes a concise taxonomy of artificial languages and examines the purpose and functions of constructed languages, discussing their appeal and the challenges they present.*

Keywords: *constructed languages, the purpose of constructed languages, the function of constructed languages, artificial languages, literature review of constructed languages, taxonomy of artificial languages, appeal and challenges of constructed languages*

1. Historical Background of Constructed Languages

Constructed languages, also known as “conlangs”, exemplify the remarkable creativity and inventiveness of human beings within the domain of language. These artificial languages, intentionally devised rather than naturally evolved, have emerged as captivating and multifaceted elements within literature and cinema. According to Okrent, „works on invented languages usually classify the languages into three categories. Languages like Wilkins, which are completely created from scratch, are called a priori languages. Languages like Esperanto, which take most of their material from existing natural languages, are called a posteriori languages. Languages like Volapük, which contain elements of both types are categorized as mixed”². Authors, linguists, and filmmakers have employed constructed languages to enhance storytelling, deepen world-building, and provide a window into the cultures and societies of their fictional universes. However, Okrent argues that, „the history of invented languages is, for the most part, a history of failure. Many of the languages involved years of work and sacrifice. They were fueled by vain dreams of fame and recognition, or by humble hopes that the world could be made a better place through language, or, most often, by a combination of the two”³.

This paper delves into the realm of constructed languages, exploring their historical origins, purposes, notable examples, and the influence they wield in literary and cinematic contexts. The origins of constructed languages can be traced

¹ This article represents a shortened version of part of a chapter of the author’s unpublished doctoral dissertation for the Doctoral School of Linguistic and Literary Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, “From Fiction to Function. The Use and Influence of Dothraki and High Valyrian Constructed Languages in the Game of Thrones Fandom.”

² A. Okrent, *In the Land of Invented Languages: Esperanto Rock Stars, Klingon Poets, Loglan Lovers, and the Mad Dreamers who tried to build a Perfect Language*, United States, Spiegel & Grau, 2009, p. 275.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

back centuries, with early pioneers venturing into the sphere of language construction for various purposes. „Though it might seem like language creation is a recent phenomenon, with the success of shows like “Game of Thrones” and films like “Avatar” the conscious construction of language is probably as old as language itself”⁴. Nevertheless, prior to delving into a general description of contemporary constructed languages crafted explicitly for diverse television shows and films, we find it imperative to embark on a historical journey, retracing the origins and developments of language construction from its inception. According to Edwards and MacPherson, „in the seventeenth century, for example, Comenius (1592-1670), Descartes (1596-1650), and Leibniz (1646-1716) were all concerned for a universal auxiliary system that would transcend group boundaries. Large (1985) tells us that, since the early seventeenth century, `several hundred` constructed languages have been created”⁵. The earliest record we have of a consciously constructed language is Hildegard von Bingen`s *Lingua Ignota* (Latin for “unknown language”), which was developed some time in the twelfth century CE. The abbess`s creation wasn`t a language proper, but rather a vocabulary list of just over a thousand words (most of them nouns). Hildegard developed this “language” for use in song, dropping *Lingua Ignota* words into Latin sentences for, presumably, a specific kind of religio-aesthetic effect. In the 17th century, John Wilkins proposed a universal language known as the Philosophical Language, aimed at facilitating efficient communication and the sharing of knowledge among scholars from diverse linguistic backgrounds. These early attempts laid the groundwork for the subsequent development of constructed languages. However, it was the seminal works of J.R.R. Tolkien, the renowned philologist and author of “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings”, that brought constructed languages to the forefront of literary and cinematic endeavors. As a scholar well-versed in philology, Tolkien created numerous languages for his fictional world of Middle-earth, with Quenya and Sindarin among the most prominently developed. Tolkien`s linguistic creativity extended beyond mere vocabulary; he crafted complete grammars, writing systems, and linguistic histories for his languages, fostering linguistic authenticity and a profound connection between language and culture within his literary creations.

Nevertheless, a conventional question comes to the forefront of discussion: What prompted the need for constructing new languages, given the existence of hundreds of natural languages that people could readily learn and utilize? Indeed, the response to this question unveils a simpler explanation than presumed. Edwards and MacPherson, in their research, explain that „the desire has been to produce a neutral auxiliary that would facilitate global communication”⁶. The foremost rationale that drove philosophers to be preoccupied with creating new languages was „the need for

⁴ D. J. Peterson, *The Art of Language Invention – From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves, the Words behind World-Building*, New York, Penguin Random House LLC, 2015, p. 7.

⁵ J. Edwards; L. Macpherson, *Views of Constructed Languages, with Special Reference to Esperanto: An Experimental Study*, in *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 11 (3), DOI. 10.1075/lplp.11.3.03edw ISSN 0272-2690 / E-ISSN 1569-9889, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 284.

neutrality that has typically left powerful existing languages out of the lists, for they are tinged, as it were, by history and `imperial prestige`. Thus, the way is theoretically clear for a constructed language to fill what is perceived as a yawning and receptive gap⁷. Although all these aspirations may appear to be logical and pragmatic, an essential inquiry remains: do constructed languages, even when designed to improve communication across diverse social groups, acquire practicality and necessity in the eyes of those expected to learn and apply them within authentic social contexts? In one of Emmart's research studies, an examination is made of two U.S. polls conducted in 1952 and 1961. The findings reveal that a limited number of respondents expressed consideration for constructed languages, as French, Spanish, and German emerged as the prevailing selections for the languages to be taught⁸. Moreover, „Hungarian polls taken in 1947 and 1949 showed initially that 86% approved of Esperanto, but this dropped drastically, in favour of Russian, in the second sampling⁹. According to Edwards and MacPherson, „Forster has provided the only study to date of the Esperanto movement that gives statistical details and a `profile`. The subjects engaged in Forster's survey comprised both a well-educated cohort (university undergraduates) and a highly educated cohort (university teachers)¹⁰. However, as the numerical outcomes of this survey are not the primary emphasis of our paper, we intend to redirect our attention to the general comment section accessible to each survey participant. Edwards and MacPherson state that „at the end of the questionnaire, all respondents were encouraged to provide comments, either on specific questions asked or about the topic in general. It is noteworthy to observe that „the most frequent themes were the `deadness` of the whole issue, the potential erosive quality of constructed languages, the impracticality of such languages, and the `Catch-22`: why should one learn a constructed language until enough others have learned it to make the venture useful?¹¹ It is evident that these statements address the potential doubts or reservations about learning a constructed language, given the need for a significant number of speakers to ensure the language's practicality and usefulness in communication. Next, we will exhibit a selection of responses provided by the participants to the questions in Forster's questionnaire, as documented in Edwards and MacPherson's research paper:

1. "Sorry, this is a dead issue, and an ill-founded one. The implications of a global language are dangerous, misleading and, frankly, naïve."

2. "I am sympathetic to the idealism; however, the development of such a language will destroy the rich variety of dialects... I prefer this rich variety of polyglot peoples, who may misunderstand each other, to what I see as a boring monoglot world."

3. "I am not sure that teaching such a language is practical... too artificial... better to broaden an existing language."

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 288.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

4."If many people knew the language, it would be useful, otherwise it is useless... my interest in learning depends on how much use it would be to me, and this depends on how many others learn it"¹².

Summing up their findings, Edwards and MacPherson state that „when we look at the evaluations of motives for learning constructed languages, we find that all respondents put practical motives above others [...]. Taken together, these questions indicate that while practical motives would be the ones involving in learning a constructed language like Esperanto, respondents, nonetheless felt that such a language was not, overall, a very practical or realistic proposition."¹³ Furthermore, the respondents were queried about the practical and idealistic appeal of constructed languages in Forster`s questionnaire. The choices made by the respondents are unsurprising, considering the long-standing skepticism surrounding constructed languages from their inception. According to Edwards and MacPherson, „most respondents opted for the former, or for a combination of both.” They underline that „the faculty group was less likely to agree that learning a constructed language would be important to them, less likely to view constructed language as useful when seeking employment, and tended to be more doubtful of the potential benefits of languages like Esperanto¹⁴. It is pertinent to point out that within the context of language learning, particularly in the context of constructed languages, a significant majority of respondents prioritize the practicality and utility of the specific language. We venture to suggest that this inclination holds true not only among Forster`s questionnaire participants but also for a broader audience. In the preliminary phase of our research¹⁵, we posed a similar query: Why would individuals express interest in constructed languages beyond their fictional origins, and why would they dedicate substantial time and effort to mastering a language that might not be widely spoken or possess tangible utility in social interactions? These questions prompted us to interact with David Peterson, the creator of Dothraki and High Valyrian, in a discussion regarding these matters. His responses, while straightforward, were both compelling and transparent. In the forthcoming section, we will highlight a couple of questions extracted from our interview¹⁶, along with Peterson`s responses, relevant to the topic discussed earlier:

Interviewer (researcher): What underlying factors do you believe motivate members of the Game of Thrones fandom to acquire proficiency in Dothraki or High Valyrian, despite the availability of various natural languages that could be learned for utilization in diverse social settings (e.g., Spanish, French, Dutch, etc.)?

David Peterson: „This question betrays what I find to be an utterly bizarre equivalence. Why do so many people read fiction books when they could be reading

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 298.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 299-300.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 300.

¹⁵ Author`s note: It refers to the research conducted by the author for her doctoral dissertation, entitled “*From Fiction to Function. The Use and Influence of Dothraki and High Valyrian Constructed Languages in the Game of Thrones Fandom.*”

¹⁶ Personal interview with David J. Peterson, conducted on 05.06.2023.

histories that would be more instructive and tell them more about why the world is the way it is today? It's as if there are a fixed number of hours in one's life that one must devote to language study, and studying Dothraki means they're not studying Japanese. This doesn't make any sense at all. It's not as if people who are studying High Valyrian were salivating to study German until suddenly Valyrian popped up and stole all of those potential German learners away with a flashy ad campaign. I imagine that people study High Valyrian for the same reason I create languages: They enjoy it. There's nothing mysterious or nefarious about it."

Interviewer (researcher): Do you hold the view that individuals who express interest in learning Dothraki, for example, are primarily driven by a desire to assert their affiliation or sense of belonging within the Game of Thrones fandom? Alternatively, could their primary motivation be the acquisition of the language for practical purposes, akin to any other language, in order to engage with fellow Dothraki speakers in real-world contexts?

David Peterson: „I would say the vast majority are interested in the language because of the show. A small minority might be there because they're interested in the books. A tinier sliver might be there because they're interested in conlangs in general. Perhaps one or two will be there because they're interested in the language for its own merits. For High Valyrian, I think a ton are there because they use Duolingo, and the language is there."

To conclude, within the sphere of language and human ingenuity, constructed languages emerge as a testament to the boundless creative potential that individuals possess to reshape communication. These linguistic creations not only enhance storytelling but also provide a fascinating glimpse into the remarkable capacity of humans for innovation. Exploring the historical origins and evolution of constructed languages reveals a continuous thread of human curiosity and aspiration toward effective cross-cultural communication. From the pioneering initiatives of figures like Comenius and Wilkins to the contemporary era represented by Tolkien and beyond, the development of conlangs mirrors our evolving comprehension of linguistic universality. The fusion of constructed languages with literature and cinema underscores the significant impact of language on narrative depth and world-building. Through the meticulous crafting of entire linguistic ecosystems, authors and filmmakers harness the potency of language to immerse audiences within fictional universes. Furthermore, the analysis of the pragmatic versus idealistic appeal of constructed languages reveals a subtle balance between the desire for worldwide interaction and the intricate socio-linguistic mosaic of our society. While practical motivations guide learners toward linguistic acquisition, idealistic pursuits reflect the enduring human longing for cultural and linguistic impartiality. Additionally, the insights shared by David Peterson, a prominent language creator, provide a valuable perspective on the motivations underpinning the pursuit of constructed languages. His viewpoints underscore the diversity of incentives that prompt individuals to explore the depths of linguistic invention, spanning from affiliation with fandom to personal enjoyment. In broader terms, constructed

languages not only function as linguistic tools but also take on the role of cultural artifacts reflecting societal aspirations and concepts of global unity. As the domain of language continues to evolve, the significance of constructed languages resonates within the intricate interplay of cultural identity, communication efficacy, and imaginative storytelling.

In conclusion, constructed languages stand as an engaging bridge between human creativity and linguistic exploration, enriching both the literary and cinematic domains. Their historical significance, contemporary applications, and diverse motivations for learning affirm their enduring relevance within an ever-evolving linguistic landscape.

2. Artificial Languages vs. Constructed Languages – Taxonomy of Artificial Languages

To explore the classification of any artificial language, it is essential to have a clear understanding of what these terms entail. As defined by the online Cambridge dictionary, an artificial language is „a language that has been created for a particular purpose, rather than one that has developed naturally as a way for people to communicate.”¹⁷ However, we find this definition to be overly simplistic and lacking in its coverage of all facets pertaining to artificial languages. According to Stria, „there are many systems called artificial languages. Some authors mention around 1000 of them and the number is still rising. However, this number might be changing radically depending on the definition, as the broadest comprises systems from restricted codes to particular forms of natural languages”¹⁸. The author states that, „as a matter of fact, this dichotomy of natural i.e. traditional ethnic languages such as English or Hindi and artificial languages is relatively new as it dates back to 19th-century linguistics which was strongly influenced by Darwin. However, when language is considered as a construct of human culture, the label natural does not really seem to apply. In addition, the term artificial is often misused by being applied to a wide variety of codes and systems not related in any way”¹⁹. Considering the ongoing debates regarding the classification of artificial languages and the varying perspectives on what qualifies as artificial, it is essential for us to present multiple definitions from scholars in the field, including Blanke. According to the author²⁰, artificial languages can be defined, as follows:

1. Regularized and standardized literary language, as distinguished from dialects [...];
2. Ethnic languages, highly regularized to maintain them at a particular stage of development (Sanskrit, church Latin) or to modernize the (Modern Hebrew, Bahasa Indonesia, Landsmål);

¹⁷<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/artificial-language>, accessed on 28.04.2024.

¹⁸ I. Stria, *Classifications of artificial languages*, in *Language. Communication. Information, Język. Komunikacja. Informacja*, 8, 2013, p. 125.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ D. Blanke, *The Term “Planned Language”*, in H.Tonkin (ed.), *Esperanto, Interlinguistics and Planned Language*, University Press of America, 1997, p. 3.

3. Consciously created languages to facilitate international communication [...], that is, planned languages;
4. Nonredundant, formulaic, or symbolic languages to facilitate scientific thought [...];
5. Programming languages for computers [...];
6. Machine languages for automatic translation”²¹.

Blanke’s provided definitions highlight the potential for confusion surrounding artificial languages, as many instances involve the classification of the code used as artificial. According to this definition, artificial languages are consciously crafted languages designed to facilitate international communication, also referred to as “planned languages.” Nevertheless, among the languages examined in our study²², only Esperanto aligns with this description due to the fact that it is also considered a constructed language and boasts a significant global community of speakers.

Stria draws on Schubert, according to whom „in the interlinguistic literature the term artificial as opposed to natural is regarded as “crudely misleading”²³ because it suggests that languages created to facilitate international communication are in fact identical to machine or formulaic languages. Other names have also been used throughout history: universal, international auxiliary, constructed, planned, and invented”²⁴. Stria cites Blanke who „distinguishes between two groups of terms that sometimes overlap, that is constructed/artificial which points towards the creation of the language and planned/universal which describes the language’s function.”

Following this, we aim to present an alternative categorization of artificial languages, as under the term “artificial”, „a good deal of various items can be placed”²⁵:

- programming or machine languages (COBOL);
- experimental languages:
 - philosophical (Toki Pona)
 - logical (Lojban)
 - pasyographies (Solresol)
- international auxiliary languages (planned languages, hereafter IALs);
- artistic languages (Klingon, Quenya);
- normative languages:
 - superdialectal (RumantschGrishun, Standard Arabic);
 - standard literary languages;
 - revived (Cornish);
- controlled languages (Caterpillar Fundamental English);
- reconstructions (Proto-Indo-European);

²¹ Blanke, apud. I. Stria, cited edition, pp. 125-126.

²² Author’s note: It refers to the research conducted by the author for her doctoral dissertation, entitled “*From Fiction to Function. The Use and Influence of Dothraki and High Valyrian Constructed Languages in the Game of Thrones Fandom.*”

²³ Schubert, apud. I. Stria, cited edition, pp. 125-126.

²⁴ I. Stria, cited edition, p. 126.

²⁵ cf. Carlevaro Eco, apud. I. Stria, cited edition, p. 126.

-pidgins and creoles;
-oneiric languages, xenoglossias, glossolalias”²⁶.

In her study, Stria uses the term artificial „as a broad name for all languages that are the result of deliberate and conscious creation and planning”, and we will adopt a similar approach. To maintain clarity, we will consistently refer to these languages as “constructed languages” or “conlangs” throughout the entirety of the paper, rather than using terms like “artificial languages”, “artistic languages”, or “artlangs”, which are also occasionally employed²⁷.

In summary, this segment of the paper sought to clarify the term “artificial language” by delineating definitions from scholars and diverse categorizations. Additionally, it aimed to differentiate between artificial and constructed languages and establish the terminology that is consistently used throughout the paper to mitigate any potential confusion or misinterpretations.

3. The Purpose and Function of Constructed Languages

Constructed languages serve diverse and compelling purposes within literature and cinema. One primary function is to imbue fictional worlds with a sense of depth and realism. Language is an integral aspect of human culture, and by creating languages for their imaginary societies, authors and filmmakers breathe life into these civilizations, making them feel more tangible and authentic to audiences. The linguistic features, lexicons, and dialects of constructed languages offer unique insights into the cultural values, beliefs, and social structures of the fictional communities they represent. Furthermore, constructed languages can serve as powerful tools for character development. An individual’s language often reflects their background, upbringing, and affiliations. By giving characters their own distinct linguistic patterns, creators can offer subtle cues about their identities, loyalties, and personal histories. Constructed languages can also underscore the barriers or connections between characters, facilitating or hindering communication and fostering intricate relationships. In addition to enhancing world-building and character development, constructed languages can establish a strong sense of identity for fictional cultures or species. Through these languages, creators can communicate the nuances of a society’s values, rituals, and customs, further enriching the storytelling experience. This aspect is particularly evident in cinematic contexts, where constructed languages can serve as auditory markers that distinguish fantastical realms from the real world.

Numerous constructed languages have left an indelible mark on literature and cinema, capturing the imaginations of audiences worldwide. Among the most iconic examples is Klingon, created by linguist Marc Okrand for the Star Trek (1966) franchise. Klingon’s guttural sounds and robust grammar have become synonymous with the fierce warrior race it represents, capturing the essence of Klingon culture and ethos. In the realm of cinematic achievements, Na`vi stands out as a meticulously

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

designed constructed language. Developed by linguist Paul Frommer for James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009), Na'vi resonates with harmony and intricacy, reflecting the bond between the indigenous inhabitants of Pandora and their natural environment. Moreover, Tolkien's Quenya and Sindarin languages have endured the test of time, leaving an enduring legacy on both literature and cinema. These Elvish languages, with their elegant phonetics and rich linguistic histories, have inspired generations of language enthusiasts and continue to influence the fantasy genre profoundly.

Constructed languages have surpassed their original contexts, permeating popular culture and gaining enthusiastic followings among fans and language enthusiasts. Language institutes, dictionaries, language learning resources, and conferences dedicated to specific constructed languages have emerged, signifying the enduring impact of these linguistic creations. Fans of constructed languages engage in language learning and immersion, further deepening their appreciation for the fictional worlds they adore. In turn, the influence of constructed languages extends beyond fandoms. These languages have inspired other authors, filmmakers, and creators to explore the potential of language as a tool for world-building and storytelling. Additionally, the popularity of constructed languages underscores the universal fascination with language as a fundamental aspect of human identity and communication.

4. The Appeal and Challenges of Constructed Languages

Constructed languages serve as a means to transcend linguistic barriers, enabling writers and filmmakers to convey the intricacies of diverse cultures and interstellar civilizations. They add an aura of authenticity to the fictional settings, heightening the sense of immersion for audiences. By incorporating constructed languages, creators can achieve a level of detail and verisimilitude that resonates deeply with fans, fostering a sense of fascination and dedication to their works.

However, crafting a successful constructed language is no trivial task. Linguists and language creators face the challenge of developing coherent and consistent linguistic systems that align with the cultural and narrative contexts of the fictional world. Additionally, the language must be accessible enough for performers to learn and convincingly portray in the visual medium.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has provided a succinct literature review of constructed languages, shedding light on their historical background and the distinctions between artificial and constructed languages. The inclusion of a concise taxonomy of artificial languages has clarified the various types and their classifications. Furthermore, the examination of the purpose and functions of constructed languages has highlighted their unique appeal and the challenges they face. This review underscores the significance of constructed languages in literary and cinematic contexts and their broader cultural and practical implications.

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